

Presented by **Tsukasa Tanimai**
Illustrator **Kouichiro Kawano**



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Part 7 — Protector of Kanae (Final Part)

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Deuswulf.

The huge, ferocious creature was more beast than demi-human, and the intensity of its presence made all who looked upon it shiver.

The immense power hidden within was visible in the way that its fur would shine and ripple with every movement of its supple muscles.

Kai saw its magnificent form come into view, and he soon noticed that its fur was surprisingly dirty. Even from afar, he could see that its entire body was covered with countless wounds. As it walked, it appeared to be dragging its rear-left leg. As the macaques in black used their weapons to drive it forward, it was clear that some trick had forced this once-revered beast into servitude.

“Now have at it! Monsters!”

The diabo on the throne lifted its head in response to the loud shouting from the hole above its head. When it saw Wise Princess, it began to move and appeared intent on eating her. Wise Princess tutted in frustration and drew further back into the hole with the pup in the cage held out in front of her like a shield.

When they saw their leader in danger, the macaques in black panicked and began to swing their weapons at the deuswulf one after another, forcing it to take action. The deuswulf howled with pain and then knocked down the nearby macaques with a toss of its head, and then delivered a kick to the macaques tormenting it with their weapons from behind. That alone was enough to make a portion of the army in black lose all organization.

“Monster, fight!”

Wise Princess brought her unsheathed knife close to the caged pup, and it released a yelp that was just barely audible. Finally, the deuswulf reacted, and

its reaction was fierce. Its huge body bounded forward to scale the terrace of rock platforms, and it moved with such force that every macaque standing nearby was knocked back.

The army in black raised a cheer when they saw the wolf charge forward. They behaved as if this accomplishment was sure to be enough to turn the tide and assure their victory.

By Kai's side, Torud of the Nenem tribe was trembling with his head hung and his back hunched, as if he couldn't bear to look at what was happening.

"Hey."

Kai tried to get Torud's attention, and he couldn't understand why Torud was covering his ears. Porek urged the chief of the Nenem tribe to raise his head, and he finally did so. They saw the mortified expression on his face, but Torud said nothing.

Kai wanted at least a little more information. He'd had no prior knowledge of these macaques in black or the "Wise Princess" they followed, but now he needed to know as much as possible about this huge white wolf that was like nothing he'd ever seen.

They had to press Torud before he finally spoke.

"Tell me what a deuswulf is."

"From north... gods who protect."

"Gods who protect?"

"Strong humans steal land of weak demi-humans. Species that can't live in forest go through forest and live on plains at northern limit. Ones called orgs. We say northern limit because this is as far as we can live. Farther north, nothing can live. Land of snow, ice, death."

"..."

"Things come from the edge. Evil things."

As Kai listened to Torud's faltering speech, he had a vague idea what was meant by the "things" that came from the edge.

The orgs often boasted of their superior strength, but even they were struggling with an invasion that required the combined strength of their species.

“You mean the ones from the snow plains?”

“Vile creatures. They invade land, wipe us out.”

“Then what about this deuswulf?”

“Creature that protects us from ones from snow plains. Since long ago, it lives on Mount Kamur and protects land.”

“And now... you’ve enslaved it?”

“Mad Princess did this.”

At the northern limit, at the boundary between the plains and the land of ice, where survival becomes impossible for even the toughest demi-humans, giant wolves lived on a precipitous, frozen mountain, where they tirelessly killed and consumed the external enemy. The surrounding demi-humans revered these deuswulves, and it was only natural that they came to treat them as sacred beasts.

The macaques’ invasion at the northern limit must have gone badly after they were met with fierce resistance from the resident species. A member of the royal family known as Wise Princess had joined the fighting to embolden the soldiers. Amid the quagmire, she formed a plan that was akin to a divine revelation, and with the help of a few followers, she actually pulled it off.

They had snuck into the nest of a divine beast that was feared and revered by all other species, and they had abducted a pup and lured out its parent, which was then forced to fight in their vanguard. The plan would have been unthinkable for any demi-human species that felt the smallest amount of gratitude toward the deuswulf for protecting them. That was what changed the tide of the war.

Using the ferocious power of the deuswulf, she led a small number of soldiers to one victory after another. The land gods she had captured were given to her followers, and thus she built herself an army that was something of a Wise Princess faction. She invigorated the dying cause of the loyalist faction and

earned herself the aliases Wolfmaster Princess and Wise Princess of the North.

Torud explained that the macaques in black that were following Kai even now were made up of tribes with young chiefs who were charmed by offers of land gods.

Their talk was interrupted by a yelp from the beast that echoed through the hollow space of the cavern.

Kai instinctively looked toward the source of the sound and caught sight of the deuswulf's huge white body as it lost some sort of exchange and began to slip from the edge of the stone table. It came to a stop before completely falling over the edge, but it lay limp with all four limbs twitching. Kai couldn't understand what had just happened.

The details of that short-lived battle were explained to Kai by the koror soldiers.

"The deuswulf bit the neck of the diabo and then it was thrown back. It didn't look like it was badly wounded in the exchange..."

"I saw it myself. The deuswulf was cautious. It waited for the diabo to show an opening."

The confusion among the soldiers made Kai wonder whether some magic had been used, but it was Torud who dispelled that idea.

For the macaques, fighting the diabo was more or less a daily occurrence, and they'd learned much about how to fight with it.

"Diabo is living curse. All it touches die."

There was a sizzling sound in the distance.

Each time the diabo moved, that sound grew louder and the amount of thin smoke rising from its misshapen body increased. The blue light within the diabo's body would also grow more intense, like embers flaring up under human breath.

The strange sizzling sound filled the dark space.

Its whole body is... burning?

Kai realized what the source of the sound was.

It was clear to see that the skin of the diabo was burning.

The flesh of the creature was quite literally smoldering like a charcoal fire being stirred. As the thin smoke it produced spread, the rotten smell became harder to bear.

The diabo let out a threatening screech that was like the scraping of iron against iron, and then it slowly climbed down from atop the king's throne. It must have finally decided to get up for the sake of feeding on the large prize that it had just knocked down.

It climbed down while sliding its own excessive weight along the ground. Its body was so huge that it couldn't help but knock down the remains of former inhabitants each time it stepped on a lower terrace. Part of its tail landed in a pool of water, sending a great white cloud of steam rising.

The diabo's entire body really did look like that of a salamander.

"Why's the diabo burning?" Kai muttered.

Porek told him, "This is the nature of a diabo. It is said that they are foreign gods that should not exist, and so the world itself rejects them."

"Foreign...?"

"It means that they do not adhere to natural laws of this world."

A gust of air carrying a foul stench hit them, and everyone began to choke. They knew that the source of the smell was the diabo itself.

"Stand, Monster!"

Despite the cries from Wise Princess within the hole, the deuswulf merely spasmed in agony without so much as opening its eyes. The strange curse must have been eating its way into the creature's body.

The diabo gave off flames and smoke as it hunched over the feast that was the deuswulf. But the deuswulf had been the last resort of the macaques in black, and they weren't about to let it go so easily. They charged over to come to its aid.

Those at the front pushed forward with their characteristically macaque shields held up.

The army in black were climbing a slope that was littered with bodies of their own kind.

The macaques who reached the deuswulf before the diabo bravely tried to hold it back while dragging the deuswulf away like a swarm of ants carrying food.

“It’s too late! Run!”

Torud shouted in a loud voice that was almost a scream, but it didn’t reach the area where the macaques were fighting and raising battle cries. In fact, the macaques that had stayed close to Kai had also begun charging into the cavern where their allies were in peril. There were also those who disparaged Torud as a coward when they passed him because he was a guardian bearer who chose to hide rather than fight.

Based on the confrontation some time ago, Kai guessed that the tribes gathered around the heart of the main territory in the south were the abridor faction while the macaques in a frenzy to capture new territories at the northern limit were tribes scattered across the northern region. Which meant that those macaques must have been the royalists who pledged loyalty to the royal family. They must have been those dispatched with Wise Princess to aid the war efforts at the northern limit.

“Wait! We need plan! You die!”

The warnings that Torud was shouting were all in vain.

Even demi-humans would form factions when many of them gathered in one place, and this would lead to confrontations between members of the same species. That was how Kai understood their current behavior.

“What would you have us do, Master?” Porek asked.

Kai sighed and stood up straight once more.

It would be an embarrassment if they remained there hiding in the shadows while the macaques in black were fighting so bravely.

“I suppose we’d better help.”

With the order given, Kai stepped forward while correcting the position of his slipping mask.

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The diabo was the embodiment of a curse.

Anyone so much as touched by it would die.

Kai wondered how such a thing came to be. He’d been told that someone who was once a macaque guardian bearer had transformed and turned into the diabo. Some part of him had been expecting it to be another type of guardian bearer much like himself.

But it was a misshapen creature that was nothing less than a monster.

Now how do I kill this thing?

The idea of trying to kill it without ever touching it was enough to make him stop and ask himself whether such a feat was even possible.

He’d have to defeat it by delivering repeated strikes with his weapon from a distance without ever taking a hit himself. It might have been possible if he’d had some kind of long spear, but he also doubted that a spear would be enough to whittle away the massive body that somehow burned like peat.

The other option was to use magic.

Magic might just be the most realistic option.

He felt uneasy about that conclusion. His experience fighting against the armored soldier, a member of the Rigdaros, had taught him that guardian bearers should never rely on magic.

When another group with different colored fur came in from the entrance, some of the macaques in black reacted by pointing at them and shouting.

The sight of Kai and the others in their unusual koror clothing was making the macaques in black wary, but they felt they could overpower them because of the difference in strength between the two species. Many of them were yelling

“stay back!” and “don’t get in the way!” while trying to wave them away. They waved their arms as if trying to shoo away a bunch of children, but Kai ignored them, irritating as they were.

To put it bluntly, the most convenient thing for Kai would be to let the idiots in black do the fighting for a while so he could see how the diabo killed its enemies. He wanted them to give him a chance to observe the diabo’s tactics and its quirks.

But of course, the diabo would probably keep a few tricks up its sleeve if it didn’t consider the macaques much of a threat. If the diabo lacked a worthy opponent, then he’d need the deuswulf to recover.

“Master. What should we do?”

“I’m worried about the white thing. Let’s see how the deuswulf is doing.”

Under Kai’s leadership, Porek and the other koror moved with no further hesitation. With Kai in the lead, the koror party headed toward the backs of the macaques who’d dragged away the deuswulf.

The front line of the army was struggling to hold together in the face of the diabo. The macaques in black had no time to be concerned with the koror. Their eyes remained fixed on the diabo as they continued making the same shoo-shoo hand gestures. Kai was thankful that the macaques didn’t openly wish them harm, but the longer they were treated like children, the more annoying it became and the harder it was to ignore.

“Let me get a look at it.”

Near the deuswulf, those who must have been caring for it were huddled around trying to help it.

As Kai walked around the deuswulf touching various areas of interest, the white mass of the creature simply lay there twitching. The creature’s handlers looked at him as if he was a nuisance, but they didn’t try to drive him away. The handlers were so preoccupied by their efforts to help the deuswulf that they had no time for Kai.

I can’t find any fresh wounds...

That was Kai's finding after making a full circuit around the deuswulf. Next, he searched for some internal injury hidden from view. The first possibility that came to mind was that one of its delicate internal organs might be damaged.

To look for such damage, Kai opened his eyes to the world of auras using the power given to him by the god of the valley.

Kai quietly examined its abdominal region while running his hand over it. The first hint of anything unnatural was felt at the creature's side, so he decided to try questioning one of the nearby handlers who was grooming the deuswulf.

"It feels swollen inside. Is this where the diabo hit it?"

The macaques weren't the smartest of creatures, so Kai made sure to ask in the macaque tongue while clearly pointing to the area as he asked the question. Perhaps it was just a coincidence, but at that very moment the body of the deuswulf trembled violently.

Its head sprang up and it struggled to rise despite still appearing to be unconscious, but then it collapsed to the ground once more. At the same time, Kai felt a splash of liquid against his face, and he could tell from the smell that this was a large volume of stomach fluid. It made his eyes sting, but he kept his composure and wiped it away with his sleeve.

Looking more closely, Kai noticed that the deuswulf had something between its teeth that looked like a horse's bit, and the inside of the bit was just visible from within its mouth. It looked as though a cylindrical, woven basket was held in place inside its mouth, and the basket was packed full of a familiar-looking green leaf.

Kai tried to suppress the emotions building inside him as he ushered Porek closer and had him check that this was indeed what he thought.

As soon as he felt sure that he was correct, he tore away the hide straps that held the bit in place.

A medicinal plant, similar to those given to wounded people in Lag, was packed into the woven cage that he pulled out of the deuswulf's mouth.

Those leaves had a sedative effect, but in high doses they could be poisonous, making it a dangerous plant to handle.

“Idiot! You broke it! Why?”

A macaque that must have been the leader of the handlers approached while yelling when it saw that Kai had broken the leather straps. But Kai paid the handler no attention. He threw the woven cage aside and placed one foot against the deuswulf’s head so that he could force its mouth open.

“The restorative.”

“Here, Master.”

Porek placed a small bottle into Kai’s outstretched hand. Inside was a special koror medicine made from pungent-smelling leaves pickled in a fruit liqueur. Kai poured it directly down the throat of the deuswulf.

“It’s not enough.”

“The eyes. They move beneath the creature’s eyelids. It may have awoken.”

It had regained consciousness, but still it couldn’t move its body.

At first Kai thought that the poison had already taken effect, leaving it in a weak state. But then he remembered that it had been so active a few moments ago. He concluded that effects of the poison must have been a secondary issue.

The main cause of its inability to move had to be the diabo’s curse. Kai went back to examining the creature’s internal aura in areas other than its delicate organs.

Then he finally found what appeared to be the root cause.

The aura’s so faint around its chest...

Its body was growing cold, as if its organs were already beginning to fail.

Kai had felt a particular sort of power from the deuswulf that was familiar to him as a guardian bearer. He could tell that this was a hardy creature that should have begun healing quickly even when heavily wounded. But for some reason it was unable to use that power. Something wasn’t quite right.

This was a powerful divine beast that fought countless battles against unknown monsters at the northern edge. Given the way this world worked, its power had to come from a land god, or something similar, that lived within its

body.

What if the weakened part's the godstone itself?

A guardian bearer's vast supply of spiritual energy reached the host via its godstone.

Kai felt sure of this fact because he'd experienced the effects of losing his godstone firsthand. He knew that the god within coexisted with the host while sealed within the godstone.

He wondered how a godstone might be weakened. Kai's intuition told him that the god within the stone, the very source of the deuswulf's power, was in an inactive state after being afflicted with a negative status effect by the diabo. In other words, the god had fallen unconscious. It was a god, so Kai thought it unlikely that it could actually die.

If the god had only fainted, then the sensible thing to do would be to slap the god in the face and force it to wake up. That was Kai's somewhat violent reasoning.

But how can I slap a god?

As he thought about it, the unfamiliar image that came into his head was a red box.

The words "defibrillator (AED)" stayed in his mind and were quickly followed by the words "electric shock," which were equally unfamiliar to him.

Electric? Shock?

Although an uneducated boy of this world like Kai had no way of understanding these words, the concepts they referred to were slowly coming to him. Kai didn't understand how it all worked, but he was at least able to remember a step-by-step process that seemed possible to follow by substituting in the abilities that were available to him there and then.

Kai slowly moved his hand over the position of the deuswulf's godstone and inhaled sharply before delivering a concentrated burst of spiritual energy. In that same moment, the limp body of the deuswulf sprang into the air like a fish removed from the water.

Kai repeated the process several times, but the deuswulf still didn't wake up. It seemed that he'd have to rethink this simplistic approach. He tried thinking about things on a more practical level, just as he had when first using trial and error to learn magic. With some reluctance, he also carefully tried to recall the finer details within the complex "instruction manual" in his memories.

Put simply, a defibrillator was a medical device designed to restart a stopped heart using an electric shock, but the design was based on the way that muscle cells within the heart moved in response to electricity. This made bursts of electricity effective.

What Kai needed was a set of principles for producing that same effect.

What he needed now wasn't a way to stimulate the unique organ known as the godstone; his ultimate goal was to slap the face of the god within that was slacking off.

Kai tried to develop the image further in his mind. The time when he'd felt a god within a godstone most keenly were those times when he'd felt the indescribable feeling of a god struggling in his stomach after he'd eaten it.

When he'd eaten the godstone of the org attacking the koror village, and when he'd eaten the godstone of the armored soldier following their battle to the death, he'd clearly felt something thrashing around inside his stomach. It was as though their gods really hated being eaten.

It was a fairly basic idea, but he wondered if he could somehow recreate that same situation. Kai began to test the idea immediately.

You're about to get eaten.

Kai's spiritual energy followed his mental image.

He sent his spiritual energy to the godstone within the deuswulf and formed a membrane that embraced it like a pair of hands. He then tried to form it into the invisible stomach that he'd imagined.

Once he'd created the feeling of a stomach savoring the marrow within the godstone, he constricted the membrane of spiritual energy and felt something like a pseudo sense of touch. He slowly permeated through the bony substance and before long he'd made it through the hard layer. Then he couldn't help but

recoil from the hot marrow within, as if he just touched boiling water.

It feels hot.

It surprised him a little, and he even lost his concentration for a moment, but after a deep breath, he once again began to constrict the stomach.

In no time at all, he found some foreign object within.

There you are.

He knew immediately that it was the god, or a part of its spirit, within the godstone. The only thing he'd ever expect to find lurking within the godstone was the god he was searching for.

Although he had demonstrated that this technique was useful in practice, Kai remained oblivious to the power behind the idea of artificially extracting a god dwelling within a godstone in a world where the presence of gods had a profound effect on the nature of reality. The whereabouts of the god within a live guardian bearer could easily be determined using magic, even while they were unconscious.

Next, Kai rapidly constricted the stomach as if pouring cold water over the unconscious god.

Wake up! You're being eaten!

Then it squirmed with shock.

It was like plunging a hand into a waterway and pulling out a small fish. The small life-form was fiercely resisting as if fighting for survival.

An instant later, the eyes of the deuswulf sprung open and it began coughing as its lungs started to work once more. It writhed around and then barked before lifting its body with a beast-like swiftness that caused Kai to move back. The creature was standing once more.

"Woah!"

"Our wolf lives again!"

The handlers were shouting with excitement.

The deuswulf's gaze fell on Kai, as if it had understood who had taken care of

it. Every hair on Kai's body stood on end as he felt the vast chasm that lay between deuswulf and human as life-forms. But the courage he'd learned after surviving many fights to the death made it possible for him to look the huge divine beast in the eye.

Kai jutted his chin forward, urging the wolf to go.

It may have been his imagination, but Kai felt that there was gratitude in the eyes of the deuswulf, which still looked at him even as it turned around.

The company of macaques in black were all knocked back as the deuswulf charged through them. Kai watched it from behind and saw the front line of macaques ahead of the deuswulf had already started to lose all sense of organization. They were standing on the bodies of their fallen comrades with shields held high, and several guardian bearers who appeared to be the commanding officers were risking their lives to hold back the advance of the diabo.

The deuswulf leaped back into the fray, causing the cries of many of the macaque soldiers in black to change from cries of anguish to cries of joy.

The deuswulf had learned that it was foolish to leap at the diabo recklessly, so now it carefully kept some distance away and charged around the diabo in a circle while dodging the tentacles that sprouted from it.

The instant that it was out of the diabo's sight, it swiftly changed direction by jumping off the edge of the stone table, and it landed on a rock platform located behind its enemy and several levels higher up.

Once in position, it steadied its limbs and readied itself.

"Burn it up!"

The shout from Wise Princess was heard at the same time.

Sparks flowed out from the jaw of the deuswulf, hinting at the incredible heat building within its body.

The next thing to come from the mouth of the deuswulf was a true column of fire. It unleashed hellfire that was no less than a beam of incinerating heat.



This was the true cause of the burned bodies of macaques they had seen outside of Dehoushi.

The explosive sounds that had felt so out of place in this world must have also shared this same cause.

Fire breath!

It was said that there was a mythical creature known as a dragon that looked similar to a lagarto but could breathe fire from its mouth.

Of course, no such living creature existed in this world. Kai knew that it was no more than a fragment of his memories drawn from his past-life self. It was just that the name came to him the moment he saw this feat with his own eyes.

Thinking rationally, he was sure that this had to be a type of fire magic.

Releasing such intense flames from inside the mouth wasn't something any ordinary creature would be capable of. Instead of coming from a hand, it was coming from the mouth. That was probably the only difference in the technique it used.

Doesn't its mouth get hot inside?

The heat of fire could roast flesh.

People would easily get burned if they touched a flame with their hand. It seemed to make no sense for fire magic to be released from the throat because that was little more than a hollow tunnel passing through the creature's body.

The diabo was suddenly bathed in intense flames, but the slow creature made no attempt to run. Its only reaction was to stop pecking at the fallen macaques and raise its head toward the deuswulf above it. Even with those destructive flames covering its entire body, it barely moved.

Like moist charcoal that burns poorly, the diabo boldly retained its black form within the flames. Kai now felt sure that magic was not going to work on the diabo. Even the body of a guardian bearer, which was just ordinary meat, was

barely affected by ordinary fire once it acquired some resistance. This outcome wasn't so surprising.

The deuswulf realized its attack was ineffective and leaped back. An instant later, a tentacle that sprouted from the back of the diabo like a mane swiped at the spot where the deuswulf had been standing.

There was a growl that sounded like an expression of disappointment from the deuswulf, which was now keeping its body low at some distance. The beautiful white fur on its body shimmered and what appeared to be an enormous amount of spirit poured out from the divine creature's body.

It was at that moment that Kai knew for certain that the deuswulf was also a guardian bearer with some supernatural god dwelling within it. He felt he could almost see the kumadori hidden beneath the creature's fur.

Kill it!

The god of the valley was raging inside Kai at that very moment, demanding that Kai throw himself into the battle taking place before him. He gripped the sleeves of his koror soldier clothing tightly and tried not to succumb to the god of the valley's emotions.

Fire magic hadn't worked. The sharp claws and fangs that were good enough to kill the evil creatures that roamed the snow plains had also been useless in the face of the diabo's curse. Rather than continuing to remain a bystander, Kai began to think seriously about how he was going to attack the creature. But then the deuswulf made its move.

Its attack was a plain and simple bite.

Kai braced for the worst, thinking that the deuswulf had become rash in its desperation, but what followed was confusion as the wild battle before him took an unexpected turn.

But how?

The deuswulf leaped down from the high platform, buried its fangs into the throat of the diabo, and then twisted its body in midair so that it turned with its fangs as a center point. It tore into it using nothing more than fangs as hard as iron, but it displayed astonishing combat ability as it used the power of its jaw

to form a vice that gripped and tore away the enemy's tough skin.

The deuswulf then dropped gently to the ground and spat out the piece of flesh like something better left untouched. To ensure this newfound path to victory, the deuswulf leaped at the beast once more without rest.

Kai was taken aback as he watched.

"Why wasn't it cursed?" Kai muttered, but no one answered him.

Even Torud and Porek, with their many years of experience as guardian bearers, were left speechless by this strange event.

The deuswulf had appeared helpless, but now it was throwing itself at the diabo as if there had never been a problem. And to everyone's surprise, there was no more sign of the negative status effect that normally came from touching the diabo.

Kill the diabo!

The god of the valley was also becoming increasingly agitated. Perhaps it was scolding its host for failing to act while the prey they'd come here to hunt was being killed by another.

But of course, Kai didn't move. The baron had told him that any guardian bearer who carelessly threw themselves into battle while leaving their victory to chance would not live for very long. Only a fool would enter the fight without trying to understand why the deuswulf was able to go unharmed.

Among the macaques dressed in black, there was no shortage of such fools.

Several of the guardian bearers who'd been supporting the front line had charged forward to reinforce the deuswulf's attacks.

These demi-humans with their superior muscular strength preferred to use crude, heavy weapons like their axes. The flexible axes wielded by the macaques in black were such weapons, and the weight of their blades made them slow to accelerate before each strike.

The skin of the diabo was obviously much tougher than that of a guardian bearer. The weapons they used looked capable of cutting a frail human clean in two, even if the human wore armor. But their blades could only just penetrate

the diabo's surface. Even so, the macaques in black continued their frenzied assault. They must have known that they had to keep up their efforts if there was to be any hope of survival. But the diabo didn't overlook them; it swept its tentacles to brush them away like ants biting at its skin.

This allowed Kai to find the answer to one of his questions. When several of the macaques thrown back by the diabo lay on the ground unable to move, it showed him that the diabo's curse had not disappeared.

It's still cursing them. So how...?

The battle between the diabo and the divine beast was still ongoing. They fought tooth and nail in the style of wild animals as pieces of flesh and bone were being torn away.

Although the diabo was larger in terms of its body's girth, the deuswulf's body was still several times larger than a macaque. A single bite could tear away a macaque's abdomen, and its claws were long enough to create horrific lacerations.

The diabo's movement continued to be slow. The main thing that demanded attention was the unpredictable movement of its tentacles.

Viewed from the sidelines, it didn't look like the fight was going badly. The macaques in black who'd previously been witnessing a hopeless and devastating battle were now sounding carefree as they cheered, even though many of their own had already fallen. They knew now that their deuswulf was more than powerful enough to take on the diabo.

Guide me, My God.

Somehow, the deuswulf had gained sudden immunity.

After consuming the armored soldier, he had started to feel somewhat closer to the god of the valley, but still, it didn't listen to any question he asked it. His predecessor must have had experience fighting with diabos, and now Kai was in need of the lessons learned from those battles. Kai was left scowling and irritated beneath the mask.

Then, while the koror party were standing and watching the fight between the two beasts above them, a chunk of flesh torn from the diabo came falling

toward them.

The exposed surface of the diabo's body where the flesh had been torn away burned blue with new intensity while the small piece of removed flesh pulsed like an independent life-form.

Its behavior made Kai think of an amoeba, though he'd never seen or heard of an amoeba before.

The scattered chunks of flesh bitten off by the deuswulf each behaved the same way, and their unsettling movements carried them closer and closer to the main body. There were even chunks of flesh rejoining the main body that looked as though they were being absorbed at the creature's rear.

It was proof that the diabo's body could endlessly regenerate. The deuswulf appeared to be fighting it on even terms, but in reality, it was forced to fight a tough battle with no way out. That was Kai's interpretation.

The inside of the diabo... if you look closely, it's like ripe marrow from a godstone. It's black, but I can see through it a little...

This idea had come to mind when Kai had looked at the creature as food for a moment, which was a common habit for people who lived in the barren borderlands. The idea made him smile wryly because this meat would make even a dog vomit.

Chunk after chunk was being torn away, but the pieces continued to merge with the main body as it regenerated. The battle looked endless. Or rather, it would end with the deuswulf's defeat when it finally gave in to exhaustion. Kai felt that he had to strike while the deuswulf had the strength to fight, or that outcome was going to become unavoidable.

When Kai moved forward, Porek and the koror followed behind him. They didn't look like they'd be much use in battle, but they could at least provide a distraction, they could throw the foul-smelling scent bags they'd brought with them, and they might throw sand in its eyes.

First off, I need to avoid touching it.

The chief of the Nenem tribe had given him an iron axe when they'd set out. Kai tried swinging it and got a feeling for its weight. He could tell that this was a

weapon taken from an org. It was crudely made, but it felt familiar in his hand.

The skin of a guardian bearer was hardened by the protective blessings of their god, but no matter how tough it became, it was never harder than iron. Based on that reasoning, guardian bearers would fight with iron-made weapons.

He'd heard that, before transforming, the diabo had been an ordinary macaque soldier who'd been promoted to a guardian bearer. The question was what changes had the transformation to diabo caused.

It looked as though the deuswulf's fangs could penetrate its skin. In that case, it was likely that iron weapons would also work. Kai delivered a chop with the axe, using his strength as a protector to put an incredible amount of force behind it.

When his attack landed, it felt as though he'd hit a rock wrapped in tanned hide.

He was sure that his attack had worked, but most of the power behind it had been reflected back. The only reason he'd been able to maintain his grip despite his numb hands was that he'd half expected this to happen. He'd guessed that the diabo had to be this hard after watching the macaques in black attack it with such desperation.

So that's how hard it is...

He could see that there was a crack in the blade of his axe.

The crude axe was more suited to cutting bone than flesh, but it had cracked with a single swing.

It made sense. This was more than a ragtag bunch of guardian bearers could handle. There were very few ways to attack the creature that were actually effective.

Kai made a wild sideward swing with the axe. He'd instinctively hit back one of the diabo's tentacles that came flying at him. He had a sense now for the attacks that the slow-moving diabo used most often.

He had noticed that the diabo, much like a giant salamander, had raised its

upper body to look back at the koror trying to distract it from its blind spot. The cries of Porek and the other koror behind the diabo were inaudible as they moved back, away from the huge mass that threatened them.

Its skin was hard, and its mass was equal to an entire longhouse from Kai's village. Even cutting away its flesh in a frenzy seemed unlikely to deliver a fatal blow.

The only conclusion was that taking this creature's life would require a strike to some vital area. The deuswulf was desperately increasing the intensity of its attacks while aiming for the throat and guts, which were normally vital areas of living creatures. Anything living would die if its head was cut off. That was a sensible conclusion.

Then Kai felt he was being watched.

He looked up and saw Wise Princess hiding in the hole above. As she looked down at the scene from that opening, she was observing Kai closely.

Though macaques were more heavily built than humans, she was rather small for a member of her species. Beneath her coat of white fur and her scale armor, her body was probably only a little bigger than Kai's. Her face was just visible, and it looked much more like a human face than the other macaques. She almost looked as if she could have passed for a human woman. The oldest family that the macaques revered and considered royalty may have been an advanced breed with intelligence that surpassed other members of their species.

When their eyes met unexpectedly, Wise Princess maintained composure befitting royalty. Without faltering for a moment, she looked Kai straight in the eye.

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Why am I in a place like this?

Zayena looked at her surroundings as if she'd just woken from a daydream. The reality soon came back to her once more. Instead of a restorative, she had dried leaves that her healer had advised her to throw away. She chewed them

just 10 times before spitting them back out. It meant that their effect was weakened, but it was an addictive substance, so she had no choice.

Even as she shook her head, she had to accept the reality.

Where am I? Why does it smell so bad that I want to rip my nose off? What's the ridiculously huge black thing crawling before my eyes? No one told me it would be bigger than a deuswulf.

She wished she had somewhere, anywhere, to sit down and then sleep. In her haste, she hadn't been able to get any good rest for the past two nights. While these useless thoughts were bothering her, Zayena was trying to control the monstrous wolf that would bite her to death given the first opportunity, and she was giving orders that would send her precious followers to their deaths.

Why call me Wise Princess?

Woe betide this hopeless, foolish girl.

She felt she could only keep her sanity when she was thinking this way.

Her people extolled her as Wise Princess.

She wasn't being humble. Macaques were never as sharp-witted as the other species around them, they lacked the mastery of metallurgy that orgs possessed, and they lacked the wisdom that allowed humans to create plentiful food from sand-like grains.

They were just a large, tough species that knew how to keep fighting. Being praised as "wise" among these people was not such an accomplishment.

Wise Princess.

She doubted that she had the talent to be worthy of such a title. She was an impertinent young lady who was no more than the youngest member of the oldest family that carried the blood of the first king. Knowing the danger associated with her position, she decided she would risk her life to go against their customs. She was blessed with unexpected luck when she created a foothold in Nova. Her father, the king, had always been deeply distrustful, but it was the madness in the blood of the oldest family that drove him to a political

purge, causing people to distance themselves from him. Many of his own children were also killed, causing them to flee from the palace. She escaped with her life and fled with her siblings to Nova in the north, though she had no guardian, not even a low-ranked wild god that might be given to an illegitimate child of the royal family. Once there, she was frantic to secure some land and a god just so she might find a place to live.

She had not carried wisdom with her.

She had been forced to find wisdom to stay alive.

The macaques who made it to the northern limit were locked in an endless struggle to defend their land. They begged assistance from a certain tribe that might provide mediation and allow them to make peace with another species at the northern limit that had attacked them ferociously. The tribe of long-tailed foxes served giant holy wolves living on a sacred peak in the north, and members of the tribe were considered sacred creatures beyond reproach. They held fertile land within an incorruptible basin.

She had wanted that land.

Thus, the chief of their tribe was deceived into attending a meeting where they were killed. She'd felt no guilt. It may have been that she herself was afflicted with the madness that was common to members of the oldest family.

They took the land, they stole their holy power, and they didn't even hesitate to steal the giant holy wolf that they'd worshiped. The chief of the aggressive tribe that they had been there to negotiate with was then enraged, but once she had the holy power of the long-tailed foxes, she was able to trick the holy wolf and take its cub. The rampaging giant wolf crushed the first wave of the other species magnificently, which won over many of her detractors. She had successfully turned the situation around.

She was credited for the rapid expansion of Nova at the northern limit, she gained the devotion of many of the aggressive tribes, and she built herself an army that not even her father could ignore. But even so, she did not feel worthy of the lofty title of Wise Princess.

If I'm so wise, then why did I come back here? Why would I abandon Nova after we finally established a firm foothold?

She'd worked tirelessly to amass elite soldiers and she couldn't afford to lose them, but now they were being squandered against the diabo.

She was fixing a mess made by her foolish brother who had been too easily influenced by his younger sister. But her brother had been far too reckless in many ways, and he'd brought the hate of many tribes upon himself. The countless curses they placed on the gravesite of his god were like a crucifixion, and they led to his transformation. It would have been better if he'd been reduced to a diabo while in Nova, but just because it had happened elsewhere didn't mean that she couldn't just look the other way.

For one thing, it would have been quite fitting if cowardly tribes of the south were left to slay the diabo, after the way they'd simply watched while blood was being shed on the front lines at the northern limit.

Is it my blood? Am I no better than Father?

From inside the cage she kept behind her back came the feeble whine of the pup calling for its mother. After they'd overexerted themselves on the march, the pup was allowed to grow weaker than it ever should have. If the pup's life ended now, the deuswulf would no doubt tear Zayena apart limb from limb while she still lived. Its hatred for her would drive it to devour her.

When she thought of all her sins, she didn't feel the slightest bit wise.

The one wish that had constantly been in her head was to protect the homeland of her people. It was as if she was possessed by her ancestors and driven by their fixations.

Despite all the disparagement she'd endured, despite the repeated opportunities to reconsider, her heart would never change, and she always came to the same decision.

My father must be laughing at his foolish daughter while he watches from the underworld.

Her once-feared father had been eaten.

She was told that he'd been hungrily devoured by the many people who'd lain hidden within the palace. If the king god had already returned to the grave, it meant that deep within the palace where the diabo sat, the throne—a position

that should only belong to members of the oldest family—was undefended and waiting for a new successor.

She could not allow it to be taken by someone unworthy. On the blood and honor of her glorious species, she had to reclaim the king god.

She knew that once she embarked with this determination, she would be ensnared by the thread of the spider god, whose web held all those bound by fate.

All other roads were already closed to her, and she was forced to remain on the path she had chosen for herself.

Zayena was muttering to herself and half in disbelief.

What is that small thing?

Up until that moment, she hadn't even noticed that the creature was there.

In the homeland of 100,000 macaques, the royal palace grounds were hidden deep within Dehoushi by the great lake. It was here that the king god dwelled, and no other species had ever been permitted to enter since its initial discovery by their ancestors.

Now she saw that the place was host to some uninvited guests.

It can't be... it's a koror.

As the dominant species of the forest, the macaques had forced weaker species into subservience without tolerating resistance. One such species was the koror, which were known for their dexterity and their ability to produce valuable goods.

Subservient species were forced to pay tributes, and koror were forced to make offerings at every opportunity because they kept many valuable goods. Zayena herself wore many accessories that were made by delicate koror craftwork. It was likely that the products they produced were found in great quantities around royalty and tribe chiefs everywhere.

This meant that none of the macaques felt hate toward the koror. In fact, they held a strange affection for them, as if they were valuable livestock that

were never killed needlessly.

For many generations, outsiders had not been permitted to enter the royal palace grounds. Any member of another species that crept in uninvited would be expelled after inciting the anger of more than just the royal family.

But now that the intruders were peaceful koror, Zayena felt as if it was actually somewhat amusing.

She felt she was witnessing the strangest thing. It was as if an animal had broken loose from its pen and happily gone to see its master in their home.

The koror male was holding a full-sized orgish axe that it used to hack at the diabo. It was hard to see how much of an effect each attack was having, but the extent of its power was clear from the faint reaction of the diabo, which felt no pain at all.

It was hard not to laugh at this bunch of koror who didn't know their place. She gave an instruction to her people that outsiders trespassing on their holy land should be expelled.

"Throw these idiots outside," she told them.

Her prized soldiers had gone to the northern limit and fought fierce battles for Nova. They would have no trouble staying organized while fighting the diabo, just so long as the deuswulf was keeping it busy. It was this belief that made Zayena feel that a few of her soldiers in black could be spared to deal with the koror. She had brought a collection of soldiers considered elite even within Gahama. They even included a dozen or so guardian bearers. Of those, 10 were new guardian bearers who'd been given gods recently stolen at the northern limit. They were fierce fighters with exceptional loyalty.

The quickest to respond to Zayena's instructions was a young soldier named Seod. He was a male who'd become very confident since gaining a guardian, and knew so little of his place that he'd allowed himself to fall in love with Zayena, whom he served. She had even heard that his wish was to be her mate. Zayena had no problem with daring males. She had surrounded herself with males that constantly competed to show their bravery, and she was able to assess their worth while keeping them under careful control.

They're too desperate. These idiot males.

Seod's squad began moving around the stone table where the diabo sat in an attempt to get closer to the koror, but some of them feared the enemy so much that they would hesitate and lose their footing, causing them to trip on the rock terrace many times.

It was Seod, the exceptionally fit male who led the way, who first made it past all obstacles and approached the gathering of koror with an air of disinterest.

The koror used their toy spears to threaten Seod, but this was no threat to a guardian bearer. Their spears were knocked aside with a wave of his hand. He shouted at them so loudly that his voice could be heard amid the chaos: "Back to your nests!"

He was not gentle as he grabbed each koror and threw it down. They disappeared one after another, but it was the final, most elderly koror that caused problems for Seod. It stood its ground many times when challenged. It appeared to be one of the koror's key guardian bearers, but Seod was a powerful tres sigil, so it was no match for him. As other soldiers arrived and left the elderly koror with nowhere to go, it too was knocked down.

Naturally, Zayena also wanted rid of the somewhat daring koror soldier that was out of its depth fighting against a diabo. Seod noticed this final koror that he'd almost overlooked and appeared almost bored as he reached out to grab it from below. He was about to grab its leg, but by chance, the koror stepped on his hand. Then something incredible happened.

Impossible.

Without even looking in his direction, the koror soldier slammed the sole of its shoe into Seod's face just as Seod was about to grab the creature with both hands. The kick was so powerful that it sent Seod stumbling backward, even though he was several times larger than the koror.

The angered soldiers then began to surround it, but then it did something that caused all of the soldiers to suddenly freeze.

This koror soldier must have been another guardian bearer. Zayena couldn't see its face, but she knew it must be displaying a kumadori, and the expressions

of the soldiers that were facing it directly suggested that it was a fairly high-level kumadori.

“Who you looking at?” That one clichéd line was enough to make a group of more than 10 soldiers back down.

How dare this koror.

Zayena was cursing the koror under her breath. She could see that the soldiers of Gahama were too afraid of the kumadori they saw on the koror soldier’s face.

But the enemy was a koror, and koror were so much weaker than macaques. If they all attacked it at once, there should have been no way a small koror could defend against their long, powerful arms, no matter what their sigils were.

But despite Zayena’s orders, the scared Gahama soldiers had scrambled away from the stone table. Zayena couldn’t help but tut with frustration when she saw them running like a bunch of children playing tag.

Even Seod, who was finally climbing back up the terrace platforms, was yelling angrily after feeling ashamed by the behavior of his underlings. As he failed to regain control, the anger was turning his face red, and he leaped at the koror soldier several levels above in an attempt to intimidate it.

He’d completely forgotten that there was a diabo nearby. Seod’s long arms allowed his large body to scale the terrace effortlessly. As Seod approached a level which would be within reach of the enemy’s leg, the diabo raised itself up. More accurately, it lifted up its lower body and unleashed a sweeping attack with a rear leg that had been hidden under its body.

The koror soldier was agile enough to dodge the attack, but it seemed to realize that Seod was about to move into the path of the diabo’s leg.

It all happened in an instant.

The koror soldier took the iron axe, which looked oversized compared to its small body, and put it against its shoulder to serve as a shield as it placed itself between Seod and the diabo’s leg.

The difference in size should have meant that the creature was easily swept aside, but the edge of the stone table warped upward slightly, such that the koror soldier was able to brace its feet against the surface and could just barely defend itself. Seod must have been quite shocked. He went pitifully tumbling down from the stone table once more.

Zayena had exhaled all the air in her lungs and for a short while she forgot to breathe again.

That was a surprise.

Anyone who touched the diabo would be killed by the curse.

This knowledge had been passed down by the oldest family of royalty since ancient times. Indeed, she could see that several of her own guardian bearers had already been left unable to move. Even the deuswulf that had been their last resort had completely fainted for a time.

Although some quick intervention from the handlers had brought it back, Zayena had been stricken with a cold sweat at that time. Even the ancient wolves that hunted the evil that roamed the snow plains might die instantly from the diabo's curse if they were careless. It was a threat grave enough to send shivers down the spines of weaker creatures born into this world. A diabo would devour all of the blessings of the land gods that filled the world. But just existing caused them to burn up in blue, purifying flames as the world itself rejected them. Such creatures were forced to steal the divine power of blessings from others just so that their incarnation could continue to exist. Lesser life-forms would have the power that gave them life stolen at the slightest touch.

She realized that one of her important soldiers had just been rescued by a lowly koror. Her instincts stubbornly told her that it could not be so.

The lowly koror struck back by forcefully pushing against the diabo, causing its large body to slide downward. Even as she watched the diabo being pushed back, she still refused to accept what was happening.

The koror soldier picked up a crude shield left by one of Seod's squad members and checked that the shield was big enough to hide its entire body. Then it threw away the iron axe that had been its only weapon, as if it was no

longer of any use.

It rammed into the great body of the diabo repeatedly as if testing the strength of the shield it held. The deuswulf had still been attacking the diabo from the other side, but then the deuswulf felt a shockwave strong enough to make it hastily retreat. No doubt, the diabo itself would struggle to endure that shockwave directly.

The tentacles came flying, arcing as they approached, as if trying to reach the koror soldier behind the wooden shield. But the koror raised a bare hand to brush away the tentacles as if they were a mere nuisance. She saw it for herself that they were indeed brushed away. Although brushed away wasn't quite right. It was more like they were cut away.

The koror soldier held nothing in its hand, and yet it had cut away the tentacles with ease as if it held some sword that couldn't be seen. The flesh whips formed by the tentacles rained down near the koror, causing Seod and his squad, who had already backed away, to grow more fearful and flee.

What is this creature?

The bottom of the wooden shield formed a sharp point that could be inserted into a gap in the rock. The koror soldier breathed calmly as it secured the shield in place and then fixed its messy, pale red hair by tying it once more.

Someone cried out, "Our protector!"

With Seod and the others gone, the koror gathered together and appeared to be checking that none of them were harmed.

Zayena saw that they were joined by a tribe leader who was powerful enough that even she recognized him.

It was Torud, the chief of tribe Nenem. Torud was an underling of the abridor, the one who had stolen so much devotion from her father and called himself the acting king.

The Nenem tribe must have played some part in the koror's intrusion.

Zayena kept herself hidden as she bit her finger and thought hard.

She strengthened her grip on the cage containing the pup that she held with

both arms.

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Kai felt no malice in the gaze of Wise Princess that fell on his head from the hole above. However, when the macaques in black then tried to remove the koror from the cavern, it was clear that she was certainly no friend of theirs.

If it had been possible, he wanted to work with Wise Princess's forces, which were still holding together. But it seemed he'd have to continue watching their movements carefully while thinking of some other way to make use of them.

By chance, he'd obtained a shield. It was standard equipment for a macaque, but the crude wooden shield was wide, thick, and tough, and they wouldn't have been able to use such shields if not for their high physical strength. They must have had a production area hidden somewhere in the forest, because it used a large amount of caulk that humans had in short supply and would use sparingly as a hardening agent.

This thing's good.

Kai tried ramming into the diabo several times and was actually able to push back its huge body. The stone table alone wasn't particularly wide, so he'd needed to make space for a run-up and build up some force.

He'd found that his invisible sword was able to cut through the diabo like everything else. Cutting off one of only two tentacles was a big deal. The deuswulf was fighting hard at the other side, and even if this was a diabo, it would still struggle to deal with attacks from both sides at once.

Kai felt a sense of calmness growing inside himself now that he'd found a way to defend against the diabo. Kai paid close attention to the movements of the diabo and deuswulf while thinking again about the question that had been bothering him for some time: *Why isn't the deuswulf affected by the diabo's curse?*

As soon as it knew that the fire breath wasn't effective, the deuswulf had changed its behavior.

The deuswulf had accepted that the diabo in front of it wasn't an enemy to be

taken lightly, and spirit had overflowed from its body, sending ripples through its beautiful fur, as if it was preparing itself.

At that point he'd felt nothing more than a vague sense that something had changed. Kai's guess was that its god had sensed that the deuswulf was in danger while fighting the diabo, and it had given it some sort of resistance, or some sort of protective blessing.

It made him remember the fight with the armored org.

The fire magic that had been his hidden trick had been ineffective when he used it for a second time. He remembered how the armored soldier had laughed and ridiculed him for using curses.

Guardian bearers that housed a god already had tough skin for the sake of ensuring the safety of the god within them. If they encountered some external effect that threatened the life of the host vessel, the god within them would immediately protect its host by providing some blessing that provided resistance against that effect.

The deuswulf had endured the diabo's death curse once.

The god must have then provided some sort of resistance against it. That was Kai's chain of reasoning. But unless the host vessel or the god within understood what was producing that external effect, there was no way that the resistance could be activated. The evidence for this was in the fact that Kai's invisible sword had been able to damage the armored soldier repeatedly.

In other words, this meant that either the deuswulf or the god that blessed it had understood the nature of the diabo's death curse and the reason behind the negative status effect. To Kai and the macaques, the curse was beyond explanation, but to the deuswulf, it was all within the scope of some existing knowledge that they'd learned through everyday life.

At the edge of the northern limit, divine beasts had continuously offered protection from "evil things," but Kai didn't know what sort of creatures those were. It did, however, make sense that some special wisdom might be gained from battling against those unknown creatures.

The ones that roamed the snow plains at the edge, where even the toughest

demi-humans were unable to live for very long, might not have obeyed the world's natural laws, and it was even possible that those life-forms were somewhat similar to the diabo.

Hey, God of Mine.

Kai tried directing his thoughts inward.

The god of the valley was revered by those around him as a protector and had come to be feared. There was no way it didn't know anything about diabos. It had even been filled with murderous rage when it saw the thing, so it was hard to imagine that it didn't know anything about it.

Give me some resistance against diabos.

...

It wasn't quite so easy to start a conversation.

Kai felt as though he was trying to communicate with one of the old folks from the village who struggled to hear anything. Old men and women still had their good points, and he had nothing against them as long as they still worked, but now was no time to let the god of the valley sit idle.

If it was going to continue to pretend it couldn't hear, then Kai had some ideas about that. The god of the valley was inside Kai's godstone. And just a while ago, Kai had found a new method for affecting the god that was using his body as a shell.

Hey!

He had so much spiritual energy inside himself already that he didn't need to gather it. Forming a "stomach" was no trouble at all.

He imagined gripping with open hands.

That mental image alone caused Kai's power to reach the god within his godstone. A curled-up, resting, little life-form awoke with a start. That was the image that came to mind.

You gotta tell me! How do I beat a diabo?!

Kai visualized his words as images and sent them to his god. His god received

the image and appeared to freeze like a frog hit with a splash of water, and then it began to mumble what sounded like a series of incoherent curses. His god was filled with burning hatred toward the diabo, and it wasn't clear whether Kai's words had reached its ears.

Kai had seen many times how people could be thrown into confusion after receiving a life-threatening injury in battle. They would spout nonsense to anyone who'd listen as if trying to make their last words heard, but it was surprising how going along with it could lead to a conversation.

Kai continued to pay attention to the movements of the diabo while casually offering some responses.

Detestable, detestable...

You got that right. I can't stand this thing.

It erodes the ground; it trespasses.

Wow, sounds awful.

Quickly. Quickly. It must die. It must.

Sure, I'll kill it right now.

Yes. It must die. Waste no time!

How do I kill it though?

Quickly! Quickly!

Yeah, but I'm asking how.

Pierce it! Strike the perch!

Finally.

This was the one piece of information he needed.

There was a godstone within the diabo.

Naturally, the guardian bearer must have had one somewhere before transforming into a diabo, and in the process of turning the host into a meat vessel, the godstone became a vital spot incorporated into the diabo's own body. The godstone was the place where the diabo took root when appearing in

this world. The diabo would sink into it looking for a hospitable environment, similarly to any ordinary land god that used the godstone as the resting place within their host.

This thing they called a godstone was probably an organ that acted as a natural receptacle for living creatures to house higher forms of existence such as gods. Kai theorized that some mysterious evolution had occurred to provide a place that allowed life-forms to gain the exceptional power that came with housing a guardian.

A perch.

In other words, all he had to do was destroy the godstone located somewhere in that huge body.

The problem is...

He had no way to guess exactly where the godstone was located.

He held the diabo back using the wooden shield. While the diabo was fighting to regain the ground it had given up, Kai tried to determine the godstone's whereabouts by catching glimpses of the areas across its stomach and back.

Ordinarily, the godstone tended to be found near to a living creature's heart, so the place where Kai focused his attention was the chest region of the diabo. He examined it the same way he'd examined the deuswulf. He looked inside using the god of the valley's gift that allowed him to see auras.

But the diabo was cloaked in a powerful aura that made it difficult to see the inside clearly. There was already an extraordinary amount of aura flowing out of it, and the blue flames that burned its skin were bright enough to hurt the eyes, so the whole thing was overwhelming to the senses. Worse than all of that was the foul stench that was so awful it brought on tears.

Even with the thick scarf around his neck pulled over his mouth, the smell still made him light-headed. It had started to give off white clouds, similar to the smoke of tobacco leaves, which drifted over, carrying the most terrible smell and making his eyes sting. This might have been its response to being repeatedly rammed with the shield.

He couldn't help but feel pity for the deuswulf knowing that its sense of smell

must have been much more sensitive, and it was biting into that foul-smelling flesh directly. It must have had some amazing mental fortitude.

The deuswulf's concentrated attacks on the throat were working. From where he was standing, Kai could see that it had already torn halfway through the diabo's thick neck.

But will it even die if it loses its head?

The deuswulf was fighting ferociously and no doubt thought that removing the head would mean victory. But the bitten-off pieces of the diabo's flesh were quickly creeping back to the main body from all sides.

There was no doubt that a human guardian bearer would die if their head was cut off. But this salamander-like monster didn't look like it was about to die, head or no head. Unlike most living creatures, the diabo didn't look as though it had a brain or any other vital organ within its head.

Kai thought for a few moments and then made it his priority to obtain new information to base his decisions on. While the deuswulf aimed to decapitate the diabo, Kai would assist its efforts from the rear.

There's so much torn away that one more hit should do it.

But of course, that wouldn't be easy. In that moment he used magic to create the longest sword that he could possibly make. Even with half of the diabo's neck torn away, it was still broader than a young balen cedar.

He used his own judgment while deciding how much spiritual energy he'd need to cut clean through, and as a result, he spent almost all of the spiritual energy that was filling his body and ready to use.

If he'd been attacked at that moment, he would have been crushed before he could move. It was a reckless plan that left him undefended, and it was only possible while the deuswulf was the main focus of the diabo's hatred.

He quietly placed the wooden shield on the ground and broke into a run. With one hand drawn back and coated with the invisible sword, he ran up the stone table.

Then he put all of his energy into a leap at the diabo from behind.

As he flew through the air, his eyes met the amber eyes of the deuswulf, which was looking at him in apparent disbelief. It must have been surprising to see a member of a tiny species so much smaller than itself, holding no weapon, jumping right into the middle of the battle.

The attack he delivered while twisting his entire body appeared to be nothing more than a barehanded chop. To the deuswulf, this was an unwelcome distraction. Rage made its fur stand on end and it barked, as if to say, *Begone, weakling*.

Just a moment later, that anger had dissipated.

A single slash from the hand of the small creature, which appeared to be empty, cut through the remainder of the diabo's neck beautifully, severing the head from the body.

Meanwhile, Kai was surprised when bodily fluids sprayed from the diabo like a sudden downpour of rain, requiring him to react fast. In an instant, he created a burst of fire magic from his hand and was fortunate that the thrusting force was enough to change the path of his fall. The head of the diabo was falling near him, but he quickly kicked it away from himself with the sole of his shoe, taking care not to touch it directly.

How'd you like that?

While falling, Kai watched to see whether the answer to the deuswulf's solution had been a valid one.

The deuswulf had also moved back quickly to avoid the great volume of bodily fluid spraying from the diabo. Then it edged forward and looked in awe at the small creature falling on the other side of the spraying blood.

The diabo had lost its head.

That great mass of flesh bounced once off the edge of the stone table and then went tumbling down toward a gathering of the macaques in black. The macaques panicked and scrambled to move back.

The macaques that were far back enough to stand their ground raised a cheer now that they saw that their deuswulf had been victorious.

“We’ve won!”

“The diabo is slain!”

As the celebration was spreading, Kai sprung back to a place that was out of danger before crawling over to his wooden shield. He didn’t feel safe until he had it held up in front of him.

He saw that the headless diabo had remained completely still for a time. It certainly did appear to have ended its life, so much so that a few fools mistook this for their victory.

The happy celebrations of the macaques lasted for only a very short while.

“Run!”

“The head not dead!”

The large chunk of meat that had been the head was now creeping through the macaques in black. Just as the smaller pieces had done, it crawled along the ground like a worm, back toward the main body. It was all the more disgusting when the chunk was larger.

Likewise, the headless body didn’t look particularly weakened. It was simply leaning off the edge of the stone table so that it could greet the head once it made its way back.

That’s how this thing is, wolf.

The deuswulf had lost all hope of victory. The fact that its jaw was strong enough for it to tear into the diabo’s flesh was certainly impressive, but that method was far too laborious for use against this enemy.

Kai watched the deuswulf’s reaction closely.

The deuswulf likewise studied the face poking out from behind the wooden shield and seemed curious about the koror soldier it belonged to.

All right. You’re not going to run?

If the deuswulf was going to run with its tail between its legs, Kai was ready to face the diabo using his own power alone.

But if the deuswulf was going to stand its ground, he wanted all the help it

could give during the fight.

Now that the diabo had recovered its missing head, it stood up once more and unleashed a deafening screech like iron scraping against iron. Now it was the koror soldier hiding behind the wooden shield that held the attention of that regenerated head.

They were locked in a struggle to the death.

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Kill it!

The god of the valley was riled up now that its host had finally decided to take action. It shuddered with anticipation as if facing off against a life-long enemy.

Kai searched within himself and found that the spiritual energy he'd used up on a single sword strike was beginning to replenish itself.

In this world, performing magic would use up the spiritual energy within the user's body. Magic became unusable once those spiritual energy reserves had been used up, making spiritual energy somewhat similar to MP. However, spiritual energy regenerated very quickly. Or at least it did for Kai, because he happened to be a guardian bearer. This rapid rate of regeneration meant that magic was better compared to a special attack that needed to be charged first.

But of course, guardian bearers used spiritual energy for many other purposes too, such as protective blessings and physical regeneration, so spending it all on one thing was a dangerous decision.

I'm gaining about a tenth back with each breath.

He felt the divine power of his god leak out from his godstone and collect within his body as spiritual energy, and the feeling made Kai recall some past life memory of hot water collecting in a bathtub.

As long as the reservoir didn't run dry, he could use magic to his heart's content. Before becoming a guardian bearer, he was at a level where he'd die after using just enough energy to burn up a single candle, but now he had an inexhaustible supply that was no doubt due to his god serving as a vast

reservoir.

Kai couldn't be supplied with more energy at once than his body had the capacity to hold, so things like the invisible sword that he'd just used required something close to his maximum output.

Cutting through two yules of flesh was about the most he could manage.

Complex and seemingly meaningless information started to run through Kai's head as he tried to estimate how much MP he currently had.

The size of each molecule in the flesh?

The square of the neck's radius multiplied by 3.14?

Total number of bonds at the cross section?

He had to force these racing thoughts out of his mind and steady himself once more.

When another tentacle came flying at him he severed it instantly with his bare hand. The deuswulf watched it happen, and then cautiously backed away in its confusion.

Just when he thought that he no longer had to worry about the diabo's tentacles, he realized that a new tentacle had grown. Regeneration was its specialty after all; it had never been limited to just the two.

Forty percent...

As he monitored the recovery of his spiritual energy, he considered the most effective way of cutting into the body of the diabo.

Even with the full power of the invisible sword, cutting the entire body in two looked like more than he could manage. If he really put everything he had into it, he'd be able to cut a little more than he had the previous time, but he wasn't sure he'd be able to cut deep enough.

If he was going to make another attempt, he wanted to cut somewhere that gave him a high chance of hitting the godstone.

His eyes had started to adjust to the aura rising from the surface of the diabo, but it was still so powerful that he couldn't see through it to the godstone's

location. If it had been ordinary bright light he could have just squinted when looking at it, but auras didn't work that way. The only way to reduce the brightness would be to make the diabo use up its own supply of spiritual energy.

While Kai was thinking, the diabo was preoccupied with bringing its parts back together now that it was reunited with the head.

If cells are active at the cross section... This must be healing magic.

For a moment, Kai had the crazy idea that he might just cut at the diabo over and over until its spiritual energy was dried up from using too much healing magic, but that made him laugh behind the mask. Cutting away little parts of the diabo one after another wasn't as easy as cutting up a vegetable. At the very least, it was beyond Kai's ability.

Another option was to try stabbing it in random places.

Stabbing the thing didn't require the invisible sword to be particularly big and he could repeat the process several times. But then the damage would be focused on small points, and getting lucky enough to hit the godstone would take tens if not hundreds of attempts.

It was a pessimistic way of looking at it, but Kai had been born and raised in the borderlands where hopeless situations were part of life. Accepting the reality of the situation was something that came easily.

The never-ending battles with demi-humans were the same. They were more than a sane person could tolerate. And whenever food supplies would run low during a famine, people would accept it and stop thinking about it. It could be described as the stoicism that came with living in the borderlands.

Kai had little trouble throwing away his indecision. He charged at the diabo with renewed determination, knowing that he was just doing what had to be done.

The godstone has to be inside its body somewhere.

Even if he had to guess the exact location, knowing which section of the body it was in would give him a much better chance of landing a fatal hit.

Several tentacles came flying at him. His spiritual energy was gathered in his right hand where he was creating the sword, so he didn't have time to direct it elsewhere. He dodged one tentacle and then another as he threw himself toward the diabo.

Then he stabbed it.

He stabbed straight through the area where he imagined the diabo's heart might be.

Damn... that was a miss.

He could tell from the sensation that he hadn't hit anything.

But of course, he'd been ready for this. He quickly prepared another sword. An invisible sword made for stabbing used about 20 percent of his spiritual energy. If he breathed evenly and left some time between each strike, he could make swords continuously.

The hole he'd made in its body closed itself before his eyes and then disappeared completely. He made sure not to forget where each hole had been as he stabbed it a second and then a third time, creating new wounds about a palm's breadth apart.

But once again, he felt no resistance.

This is endless.

He soon began to grow frustrated by the lack of results from this painstaking method. The diabo's body was as big as one of the village longhouses, and now that he'd started, Kai could guess just how long it would take and just how many attempts he'd require if he stuck with this crude plan of creating evenly spaced sword wounds. The rational part of his brain told him to give it up. If he continued to repeat this dangerous process of getting so close to a strong enemy, the risk associated with each sword strike was far too high for the anticipated reward.

He'd hesitated to use the last sword he'd made, but when the diabo tried to kick him, he severed its front leg without a second thought. As Kai was trying to buy enough time to get his thoughts in order, an unforeseen attack came at him as a torrent of black rain. Bodily fluid sprayed from the diabo, and it was aimed

right at Kai.

For a moment he felt intense heat.

Then he felt an overwhelming sensation of cold.

He felt his body temperature dropping rapidly in each place that the black blood touched, and it felt as though his skin was burned by frostbite.

The diabo's curse!

He couldn't help but feel proud of himself for thinking of a way to counter it so quickly. If the curse reached his god's perch, the godstone within his body, then his god would likely be stunned.

A stomach!

He created a thick coating of spiritual energy around his godstone.

It happened within his own body and he didn't imagine anything physical like when using magic. He only had a moment, so he couldn't use any past-life knowledge.

He just imagined it was thick.

Something thick and tough.

Every bit of spiritual energy in his trunk region gathered around his godstone. As long as he kept his godstone protected, he could survive. Kai had learned that that was true for any creature that became a guardian bearer. This priceless knowledge had been taught to him by the priest that he'd hated so much.

Protect it. Form a barrier.

The curse of the diabo could pass through the iron-like skin of a guardian bearer like it was nothing, and it didn't take long for it to seep in through the thin surface of Kai's chest. It knocked him unconscious immediately.

**

His body was small.

Any child that struggled to get enough nourishment soon after being born would never grow to be very big. This was common knowledge even in the

borderlands, and he knew many people besides himself who had grown like twisted little roots, always remaining scrawny and short.

According to custom, Kai had become a soldier upon reaching adulthood, and he wasn't surprised to find himself the weakest and the smallest in his squad. He was nimble at least, but he'd still felt like more of a hindrance on the battlefield.

I wish I was stronger.

He'd always thought that way.

His squadmates had told him.

The only way to get strong was to eat demi-human godstones. Human weaklings needed that nourishment and the power it gave them, or they'd never grow strong enough to fight.

Then Kai realized that, for no particular reason, a delicious-looking godstone had landed right in front of his eyes.

Kai felt so hungry that he didn't wait for permission to eat it. He broke it open, exposing the contents within, and he ate with no shame or care for his reputation.

No one can have it. It's all mine.

He bit into it and began to feed.

It tastes so good!

It was a delicious, rich syrup, unlike anything found in the basic meals given to villagers, and he could actually feel how it nourished his very existence.

Kai took another look at the marrow stuck to his fingers.

The marrow stuck to the broken godstone looked like a black jelly formed from dark blood, and it turned a dark, rich amber color when light shone through it. He began to salivate in an instant and then took another bite.

The juice dripped from his mouth. He soon finished eating the godstone he'd found. Kai took a look at his surroundings. Though he was unlikely to be blessed with such good fortune a second time.

But then Kai found another.

It was right there.

An unusually large godstone was cracked open and abandoned beside him.

The amount of marrow packed inside was far beyond the content of an ordinary godstone. Kai felt suspicious yet drawn toward the godstone, and then ate from it deliriously as his appetite got the better of him. It wasn't enough to satisfy his hunger. The nourishment within filled his mouth and then slid down his throat as he gulped it down. This process filled him with joy, lulling Kai into a dreamlike state.

His luck really had been good. He doubted that ever again would he be handed such a large quantity of marrow.

If this was marrow from a real godstone, then its owner must have been unimaginably big.

A strange sense of déjà vu grew inside of him.

He had seen something like this not long ago.

He felt sure of it.

Poison...

At that moment, the sweet fragrance of nourishment that came from the black jelly became a rotten smell of poison. This was a potent poison that would end one's life if just a single drop entered the mouth.

It tasted so bitter that he felt he might vomit up the entire contents of his stomach. He grew cold as if the blood was drained from his body.

He realized it had been a trap set to kill him, and his despair was accompanied by an intense rage that filled his brain.

Shit... shit... Who? Who fed me this rotten thing?

The pain made his eyes tear up as he watched the small mountain of black marrow rise up before him. It seemed he'd be buried under that unbelievable mass, so he fought to endure the feeling of dizziness while being dragged away, fearing it might crush him.

What is this black monster?

Kai wondered if the poison he'd eaten might kill him right there and then. Perhaps he'd lose all ability to move as he grew colder.

His heart was beating so hard that it felt like it might leap out of his mouth, but his body was so cold he felt he'd freeze up. Fear gripped him as death began to feel inevitable, causing his heart to beat frantically. His hand clutched his chest as he curled up.

It felt hot.

The inside of his chest alone was smoldering like a hot stone.

He wanted to warm his cold limbs. He wanted to thaw his flowing blood to stop it from freezing. Slowly but surely, the warmth in his chest spread out to other areas.

It was the heat that gave him life that was breaking free.

"Master!"

He heard a voice shouting to him.

"Our God!"

"Our Protector!"

Kai felt his body shaken violently by the many hands that grabbed him. As his consciousness was shaken back and forth, he began to wake up.

Kai opened his eyes and saw a gathering of koror around him. And behind them was a black and fearsome lump of flesh approaching to deliver the final blow.

It was the underside of the diabo's foot.

That instant seemed to stretch out indefinitely. Kai got up and pushed away his precious koror followers to scatter them and then threw himself aside to save himself from being crushed by the foot.

While rolling, he grabbed a macaque shield that was lying on the ground and pulled it toward himself to stand it up.

Thump!

The stomp carried all of the diabo's power behind it, and the force was enough to make the stone table shudder. As the energy returned to Kai's body, he charged at the diabo. He had to save the koror who were still frozen with fear. That was the only thought in Kai's mind as he charged forward. Soon after he started moving, he felt a fire ignite within his body, and the warmth spread to every part of him.

"Get back!"

He slammed the shield against the diabo and delivered a body ram to it from his shoulder to give it more force.

The framework of the sturdy wooden shield broke apart.

The shock he'd delivered to the diabo sent half of its body reeling into the air.

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The fact that he'd been able to come back from the diabo's death curse, its incurable hex, was nothing short of a miracle.

It was unclear exactly what had brought that miracle about.

It was quite possible that it was down to the spiritual protection Kai had made and thrown together the moment he was cursed. It could also have been that Kai was such a powerful guardian bearer that the curse couldn't drain all of his energy reserves.

But the curse he'd received from the diabo was unlikely to have been overcome so simply. The god of the valley may have counteracted the curse using some divine power.

All of these things were possible, but Kai couldn't say which was the right answer. But he was alive at that moment. That was the only thing he could be absolutely sure of.

I'm still alive.

He had felt as though all the spiritual energy had been stripped from his body for a time. The memory of the cold emptiness he'd felt was enough to make every hair stand on end. That feeling may have been something only ever felt

by those on the verge of death as their life's fire dies out.

He felt certain that the rapid loss of spiritual energy itself was the cause behind the sudden death that came with the diabo's death curse.

That last-ditch defense effort might be the only reason I wasn't drained dry.

Some other intelligence within Kai was trying to define the strange curse brought about by the diabo as a quantifiable effect. Even naturally-occurring poisons that quickly brought on death only worked once a particular "lethal dose" was exceeded. It was possible to stay healthy within some particular exposure limit.

He hadn't just lost spiritual energy; it had been forcefully erased from him by the diabo through some magic.

While the invisible sword had incredible sharpness, it also required enough spiritual energy to compensate for the amount cut. Likewise, the diabo's curse must have been quantified according to the amount of time spent in contact with the subject and the contact surface area, or the volume in the case of bodily fluid. The volume of fluid he'd been bathed in may have corresponded to almost an entire depletion of Kai's spiritual energy.

If the time of effect is short and energy is drained most strongly in the area of contact...

Wrapping his godstone in all of the spiritual energy he'd been able to gather probably hadn't been in vain. If spiritual energy was lost as the curse spread, then using it to reduce the effect on the godstone containing the god of the valley might have been a weak countermeasure, but not completely ineffective.

My god wasn't knocked out, so I survived it. I got lucky.

He had also been fortunate that his followers were there to rescue him after he'd fallen unconscious. If he'd been fighting alone, he would be in the diabo's stomach by now.

I'm still kinda hungry...

After the strange dream he'd had, he couldn't help but see the diabo's body as a giant mass of godstone marrow.

Although it smoldered with blue flames, the flesh itself was slightly translucent and it looked soft at a glance. The fact that its surface was tough as iron was likely due to some protective blessing within the diabo.

He wondered if the bodily fluid that gushed out like blood was the same as the juice found within marrow. He couldn't stop imagining that its body was the same jelly down to its core.

It was a ridiculous thought, but if the diabo's body was a poison that could kill those it touched, it might not be so different from the toad's marrow that had caused Elsa to fall into a coma. He just wished the part about it making people fall unconscious after eating it wasn't the same.

How'd that toad ever live with a body full of poison?

The body slam was followed by the sound of fragments of the shattered wooden shield hitting the ground. The thoughts in Kai's mind were incredibly detailed, and he felt as if the flow of time in the real world had slowed down dramatically.

Kai's slam against the diabo had caused half of its body to slide off the platform where it was sitting, sending the macaques in black who'd been gathering below running and screaming. The deuswulf dodged the falling diabo and swiftly moved toward the wider space where Kai was standing.

But it didn't want to get too close. It warned Kai to stay back by bearing its sharp fangs and issuing a low growl as it looked at him.

Kai's thoughts were starting to take shape.

The toad had carried poison in his body, and yet it had not threatened his life. There had to be some reason that he was able to live.

The bone... the godstone.

His marrow had of course been sealed within the round bone of his godstone.

The toad's body and his poisonous marrow had always been kept apart by the bone of his godstone. The reason he hadn't poisoned himself was because the bony shell provided by his godstone had sealed the poison inside.

I've been thinking about this backward...

The bone known as the godstone didn't exist to hold the marrow.

The bony substance was there as a shield to protect the body from the poison that formed inside.

The word "calcification" went through his mind. A substance known as calcium within his body could form aggregates by building up within cells.

If necessary, it could form new bones after birth.

A bone that could completely protect against the poisonous nature of marrow...

"Don't act like you're scared of me."

When Kai looked at the deuswulf, it bared its fangs even further, showing its gums as a threatening gesture. The sharp fangs in its mouth had been able to tear through the iron-like skin of the diabo with ease.

Then Kai remembered that white instrument carried by the truthseeker had been able to pierce through his own body just as easily.

Teeth... and bone...

Hey, My God. Kai directed the words inside himself.

He spoke to the god of the valley within his godstone.

Give me some sort of protection like bone.

There was a knack to establishing communication. He just had to squeeze with the spiritual energy inside himself while it was wrapped around his godstone. He felt a slight stirring inside the cramped godstone that must have been the god of the valley.

Cover my body in bone, would you?

****!

He had absolutely no idea what his god was saying.

It may have been some language transcending words that was only comprehensible to other gods.

But Kai knew that his own request had gotten through. He could feel the heat

rising within his chest.

Ripples of something unknown spread through Kai's body, transforming the substance of his skin. It only took a moment before his skin felt stiff. His body soon became rigid quickly as if his joints had been coated with stone.

At first, Kai thought he'd made a mistake, but with effort he was still able to move his joints.

His joints ground like ungreased hinges as they resisted movement, but then further changes occurred through some unspoken negotiation with his god, and bone on his skin turned to fragments that coated his body like armor.

He tried hitting one arm against the other.

They made a clunking sound like two hard objects colliding, and the strange sensation made Kai shiver involuntarily. His whole body was indeed bone.

Kai's hand moved instinctively in reaction to an approaching presence. He'd grabbed hold of the diabo's approaching tentacle in his hand. He startled himself when he grabbed the tentacle, but the shock in the amber eyes of the deuswulf was far greater when it saw what had happened.

You can't curse me.

He felt the heat from the blue-burning embers.

But the unbearably cold feeling of his life draining away was gone.

Kai used brute force to pull the tentacle toward himself. It resisted, but he dug his fingernails into it and was able to tear it away using the power of his grip alone.

He didn't flinch when sprayed with bodily fluids from inside the severed tentacle.

"You've got a blessing like this, right?"

The deuswulf tilted its head in response, as if it wanted to understand Kai's question. It couldn't be expected to understand the human tongue. But the strange, small creature standing before the deuswulf was clearly intent on defeating the diabo, so the deuswulf had gradually become less wary.

The deuswulf had accepted Kai as another hunter. Wordlessly, it asked to fight with him as a single pack by pointing its nose toward the diabo. Perhaps it moved with a pack when defending against the evil things that roamed the snow plains.

Kai felt he'd been given permission to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the deuswulf, and it was a feeling like no other. Differences between their species were irrelevant when there was a diabo to be slain.

The sluggish diabo showed its stomach as it slid down to a lower level. The deuswulf charged at it.

Thanks to the blessings of the god within, its fangs easily penetrated the skin of the diabo with the same effectiveness of the instrument used by the truthseeker.

But the diabo was so big that it was difficult to remove any significant amount of its flesh.

In that case, Kai was ready to strike the tear made by the deuswulf using his sword.

It's not enough.

He couldn't unleash his full power recklessly.

If he released all of his spiritual energy reserves at once, it wouldn't leave enough fuel for the bone skin blessing that he'd acquired for himself. He still didn't know how much power was safe to use, so he had to reduce the power he was using by half.

But the tear now went halfway through the diabo's body and a large cross section was completely exposed. The deuswulf bit into the upper half. Kai gripped its lower half.

If I can't cut it, I'll rip it apart!

They exchanged no words. They understood their objective simply from watching each other's movements.

The deuswulf and then Kai pulled the two halves of the body apart with all of their might. The shriek unleashed by the diabo sounded like a scream, and that

probably wasn't just Kai's imagination.

The diabo had been torn in half right down the center of its body, and now both halves were thrashing around with their individual limbs.

Where's the godstone?

Kai searched the exposed cross sections. Within the soft flesh, which continuously spilled out bodily fluids, he couldn't see anything resembling a godstone.

It was a few moments later that the battle took a turn.

One of the two separated halves was behaving less and less like a living creature, and the form that it held was beginning to crumble apart. The turn in the battle came when the severed head became a pulsating mass of flesh and began moving toward the main body.

Kai watched as it happened, but his focus was lost for only a short while.

The small pieces of bitten-off flesh had acted likewise.

They were all ultimately aiming to merge with the main body. The important thing was where that homing instinct led them.

"Wolf, we've got our target."

Kai showed his teeth as he grinned.

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The sure way to slay a diabo was to strike its godstone.

Now Kai had finally found a method for determining where the godstone was.

"You're not rejoining that body!"

Kai wrestled with the one mass of flesh that had started to pulsate violently.

He ignored the unpleasant feeling that came with gripping its greasy surface as he dragged it further away from its other half. Kai's superhuman strength as a guardian bearer allowed him to push that mass of flesh, which was like a small mountain.

The diabo realized that its efforts to recombine had been thwarted and thrashed its remaining front legs to change direction while moving on its stomach. A tentacle shot out and wrapped itself around Kai's arm, and then another caught hold of his neck.

The bony substance protected him from the death curse, but it did nothing to alleviate the physical pressure of the tentacle at his throat.

As hard as his skin was, it was only as hard as bone. Although the bones of a guardian bearer had a similar hardness to iron, the massive tentacles of the diabo could still crush him, and it applied enough force that cracks were starting to form.

"Wolf... Do... something...!"

The deuswulf finally took action and tore the tentacle apart with its teeth. Kai had been trying to pull himself away from it, and now he was sent flying headfirst into the mass of flesh. The liquid dripping from the mass of flesh found its way behind the mask, and Kai spat repeatedly.

Although the poison had entered his eyes and mouth, he didn't feel death approaching.

"Damn... this juice actually tastes good."

He was even able to talk with cool indifference.

The sweet fragrance was the same as the godstone marrow that every village soldier longed for. Although he didn't swallow any of it, he was hit with an intense pang of hunger.

The koror had been watching nervously, but they began to cheer when they saw that Kai was so unfazed that his stomach could rumble in the midst of the sickening stench. Porek removed a small package from his belongings and asked Kai if he'd like to eat a cake containing nuts.

Kai could suppress a wry smile when faced with that question in a situation like this one. His people must have believed in the power of the god of the valley that they worshiped from the bottom of their hearts. He lifted up the mask and gave Porek an order: "Toss it over!"

The cake was thrown true, and Kai was able to catch it in his mouth with just a slight movement of his neck. He took his time to chew it as he put the mask back in place. He still had the taste of the diabo in his mouth, but he swallowed the cake regardless. The feeling of the cake landing in his stomach was enough to lift his spirits and keep him going.

The mass of flesh was so big that it had even been a struggle for Kai, but the deuswulf had joined him and pushed with its head along the way, and they were finally able to make it fall down.

They sent the flattened mass of flesh falling down to the bottom of the terrace. Then it began to squirm in another attempt to merge with the main body.

Although it was slow to move, this large chunk of flesh moved far more vigorously than the smaller pieces as it propelled itself forward.

Porek was standing by expectantly, so Kai ordered him to not let the fallen mass of flesh get closer. Once given a task, the koror set about their work in high spirits. Torud appeared to have a vague sense of what Kai was trying to do, because he issued a booming roar that echoed through the vast cavern, and then began to beat his chest vigorously.

It served as a call to arms. Macaques hiding in the various holes here and there in the cavern showed their faces and then came flooding out. Those macaques were most likely remnants of the abridor faction who had remained defiant and had been watching the progress of Wise Princess's fight from the shadows. More than one hundred of them poured out and gathered near Torud.

"Stop that thing!"

Torud also went running down toward it and began to lead the gathering soldiers.

Kai decided he could leave it in their hands. He wiped the bodily fluids from his face with his hand as he turned toward the remaining half of the body.

The diabo understood now that Kai and the deuswulf were strong enemies. It gave up on waiting for its lower half to reemerge and began to regenerate its

salamander-like form with just the remaining half of its body.

Naturally, it had a lot less mass now that it had lost half of its flesh.

This somewhat slender looking diabo's body had started looking a lot more manageable to Kai.

Invisible sword!

Now it seemed likely to work.

This time he went on ahead without waiting for the deuswulf to bite first. As the diabo shrank back, the aura on its surface was seen in the eyes given by the god of the valley as a flickering light.

In response to an external threat on their life, a guardian bearer could receive additional blessings from their god to resist that threat. The god appeared to be struggling to think of a blessing that would be effective against the threat posed by Kai. The diabo lacked the knowledge needed to block the magic known as the invisible sword.

By gaining resistance that blocked the curse, Kai only had to watch for the diabo's attacks. He got close to the diabo by sliding along the ground to keep his body low, allowing him to slip under its flailing tentacles.

It used its tentacles to cover its head, so Kai slammed his body against it while delivering another stab, and then he forced his sword to cut upward. The cut didn't go all the way through, so both Kai and the deuswulf worked together to finish the job, just as before.

As the diabo was ripped in two, it once again unleashed a piercing cry like iron against iron. At first, it sounded like the meaningless howling of a dying beast, but soon it began to sound like speech.

That power, give me.

It threw itself down toward its severed bottom half.

"Don't let it rejoin the body!"

The koror responded to Kai's command.

Here and there, Torud and the macaques also began to cry like apes. At some

point, the macaques in black had joined them so that they could take on the mass of flesh as one.

As always, none of them could touch the diabo's flesh. Instead, they had found straw ropes that they used to pull it along like a net filled with fish.

Will eat you.

Go ahead and try.

Kai looked at how small the diabo had become and had to wipe his hand across his mouth to wipe away the saliva. There was only a single cake in his stomach, and it was still rumbling.

The diabo's body looked a little different now. As it grew slimmer, its legs grew longer, and it had taken the shape of a strange four-legged beast.

The evil god that had descended on the world had taken root on a perch that was the godstone of the transformed guardian bearer. The core of the diabo itself was no doubt that godstone. When the vessel of flesh was torn in two, the main body would be whichever half contained the godstone.

He didn't know where in the diabo's body the godstone was. But by forcefully tearing the body into two pieces, half of its body could be ruled out.

It was much more efficient than cutting and stabbing blindly.

But as the diabo became smaller, its movements also became that much more nimble. The indescribable four-legged beast had caught Kai unaware by using its newfound agility to dodge his sword.

Kai tutted in frustration, but the deuswulf was accustomed to hunting fast-moving prey. It quickly moved into the diabo's path and then gripped it in its jaws. In terms of size, the diabo was now roughly equal to the deuswulf, and its body was thrown around with each shake of the deuswulf's head.

The diabo was slammed against the stone table and then its front legs were pinned down. Kai knew it was being presented for him to cut. Without hesitating, he jumped forward and sliced through the diabo's stomach.

In keeping with their unspoken arrangement, the deuswulf pulled away the part that included the head. Bodily fluid sprayed everywhere as half of the

diabo was pulled and torn away, and Kai didn't fail to spot the glimpse of white that was visible for just a moment.

It was unmistakably a white bone.

He threw away the bottom half he was holding and cried out to the deuswulf.

"Wolf! That's it! We've found it!"

There was an understanding between them that came from fighting side-by-side. The deuswulf threw the half that had howled toward Kai.

He didn't let it escape. Kai inserted the blade of a hastily-made invisible sword into the cross section where he'd seen the white object. It wasn't a well-made sword and was more like a dagger, so it didn't create a particularly deep wound in the large mass of flesh that was the diabo.

However, it was enough to make a cut in the surface of the diabo as it was beginning to heal, and Kai plunged his hand into the cut without any hesitation. Regardless of how tough the skin was, its insides were weak enough to be damaged by kicking or punching.

Kai groped around in the slimy interior with one hand and then his fingers touched something hard hidden within. The surrounding flesh was contracting in an attempt to move the lump someplace else. Kai forced his arm deeper in and used brute force to grip the lump.

Then it was finally exposed: A white mass the size of a newborn baby. It was bigger and heavier than expected, and its weight threw Kai off-balance, causing him to land on the ground on his back. He landed in a pool of the bodily fluids that turned his whole body black, and then had to quickly move back like a mouse being chased by a cat.

This thing's huge.

Kai breathed heavily as he squatted down with his back to the stone table and looked at the final form of the diabo. Kai knew from experience what happened to a guardian bearer who lost their godstone. It wasn't instant death, but certain death would approach as the spiritual energy within their body drained away.

Even ordinary foot soldiers knew the importance of being ever-vigilant of their enemy if they wanted to live through a battle.

Before long, the body of the diabo crumbled and melted away, and Kai finally breathed a sigh of relief. But then there was a feeling of pain in his arm that made him look down. A small amount of the flesh was still active and squirming. It looked like it was stretching itself over Kai's arm like a skin in an attempt to eat him.

The diabo probably had only one of the vital organs that were characteristic to living creatures. Thus, no matter how finely it was minced, that wouldn't be enough to destroy it.

The godstone, the seat of the god itself, was beginning to regenerate as a new main body.

That main body was in Kai's arms at that very moment.

So this was the main body.

The pain he felt in his arm was most likely caused by the flesh finding its way through cracks in his bone-like skin. He scraped away the formless bits of jelly that covered him and left them on the ground.

Then he created the sword that would deal the final blow.

Help me.

It was the last wish of the diabo.

Kai ignored it.

I want to play more...

Kai felt his anger building when he thought of the great massacre that had almost wiped out the macaques being nothing more than a game to the diabo.

It was the reason the god of the valley wanted it dead.

"You're finished."

The deuswulf.

Porek and the koror.

The many macaques.

They were all holding their breath and watching as Kai brought his sword down on the godstone.

If possible, he didn't want to waste the juice that would flow out. His stomach rumbled. He didn't just want to kill it, he wanted to eat every last scrap.

Porek and the others were aghast. They must have realized Kai's intention when they saw him wipe his mouth. The macaques were stunned. Everyone had thought it was poison, but now that Kai could resist the curse, he felt that he could eat it.

To stop the juice from spilling, he first cut a hole in the top by moving his sword round in a circle.

Then he removed a small top part and looked inside the godstone. He was cautious, so he wanted to check the interior before putting it to his mouth.

Inside the hole was total darkness.

Given the considerable weight of the thing in his hand, he imagined a massive amount of marrow must be packed inside. Kai was particularly confident in the power of his eyesight. He peered into the hole.

Then he saw it.

An eye...

He saw it through the hole he'd created in the bone.

Inside that hole that was as big as a human mouth, he saw an eye looking back at him.

There was no mistaking it. In fact, he could clearly see the fear in that eye, and it filled Kai with a sense of unease.

The shock was so great that he had completely lost his appetite. He created the sword on his right hand and made the hole a little bigger.

He saw white teeth.

It felt so strange that Kai couldn't help but stare at it. But even if he wasn't going to eat it, he still had every intention of destroying this godstone. He

inserted the fingers of both hands into the opening. The feeling of lukewarm flesh squirming within made the hair on his neck stand on end.

Kai mustered up all of his strength and split the godstone clean in two. He intended to kill the disturbing life-form inside the moment it was exposed to the outside world.

Pop!

The bone broke in two.

And then.

In that moment the world was inverted.

The sky broke open.

His ears were filled with an intense sound that shook his brain, like a thunderous applause, or like open palms slapping against his face. Then the diabo's shriek, that sound of iron against iron, rang out once more, and all of the pieces of flesh scattered about the royal palace grounds began to self-destruct before their eyes. Like a fish with its innards removed, the diabo's flesh foamed and then began to split apart, turning itself inside-out.

"Play with me! More!"

Its frantic pleas grew quieter as if it was being dragged away.

"No! Put me back..."

The swirling sky intensified, becoming like a tornado.

The fearsome thing escaping from the godstone that Kai had broken apart was gushing out so powerfully that even the strength of a guardian bearer wouldn't have been enough to hold it back.

The pieces of flesh scattered here and there each grew smaller as if crushed by some unseen hand, and in a single moment, they all ceased to exist, as if by magic.

A rapid transformation was occurring, and then suddenly they knew it was over.

The moment the diabo had disappeared, something was dropped in front of

Kai as if the diabo had left him a parting gift.

“Hah...?” That was the noise Kai was able to make.

The diabo had disappeared.

And in its place, a macaque that Kai had never seen before was lying at his feet. It lay on its side with its fur wet, as if it was a baby that had just been born.

“Shendor!” Wise Princess cried.

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The macaque that had appeared before him in place of the diabo was a young male with long, soaking-wet fur.

Shendor. That would appear to be the name of this male.

Shendor studied Kai with his eyes wide in astonishment, as if he was looking at the god of death, and before long he began a painful-sounding coughing fit. With each breath, he brought up more of some foreign substance from within his lungs.

“Shendor!” Wise Princess shouted to him once again.

Perhaps her human-looking facial features made Kai imagine it, but her voice sounded very feminine and was smooth in a way that was unlike macaques.

Kai looked up and saw that Wise Princess was not actually alone in the hole. There were several macaques in black that must have been her closest followers standing in front of her as if shielding her.

With the diabo defeated, they must have entered other holes and moved through passages that led to her position. Following Wise Princess’s orders, her close followers moved close to the resurrected Shendor as if planning to arrest him. The deuswulf moved to block their path before Kai even had a chance to react.

The deuswulf kept its body low and bared its teeth threateningly. It was seething with rage every bit as powerful as what it had shown the diabo. Fear froze the group of followers in place, but then Wise Princess yelled something

from behind them.

“God of ours! Stand down!”

Those were the only words she spoke.

The deuswulf wore a look of frustration as it slowly backed away.

For reasons unclear, Wise Princess was able to command this divine beast whose power must have been far beyond her own.

Even with one of the followers holding the cage that contained the hostage pup, this relationship of power appeared unnatural. The deuswulf continued to growl in frustration, but Wise Princess moved before it without fear and commanded it to move back with a simple hand gesture. There was clearly some force that compelled the deuswulf as it backed away further.

When Kai looked confused, Torud provided him with more information. “Mad Princess is shrine maiden that serves deuswulf. She stole power of long-tail fox ritual.”

She stole the power of a ritual?

Now he understood why she’d addressed it as “god of ours” while showing not the slightest bit of respect. Kai shook his head at the unfairness of the world.

“I get it. It’s magic.”

Wise Princess’s body appeared to be bound to the deuswulf by a long, narrow trail of spiritual energy as she gave her orders. It was similar to the way that the truthseeker’s eyeball had been controlled by a trail of spiritual energy acting like a wired connection in the magic of one hundred eyes.

Wise Princess couldn’t have had absolute control, or she wouldn’t have needed the hostage pup. It was likely that the arts that controlled the deuswulf demanded that the user give clear orders at every moment of every day or the force compelling the deuswulf would lose its effect.

The follower holding the cage poked at the weak pup inside with a dagger. The combination of the two approaches left the deuswulf unable to act, and the handlers from before all surrounded it at once and forced its mouth to close

around the same woven basket as before.

Kai might have done something, but Wise Princess issued another quick command. He saw macaques in black forming a circle around him.

Several of the macaques were climbing onto the back of the suffering deuswulf and opening the side of its mouth so they could force it to drink some medicine. The deuswulf struggled, but it became calm again once the sedative they'd given it took effect, and before long it was doing as it was told.

"That's poison," Torud concluded based on the unique, sweet smell that came from its mouth.

The deuswulf was too strong to control, so they'd weakened it with poison. That method was only possible because blessings placed on the deuswulf maintained its health.

When Wise Princess's followers saw that the deuswulf had calmed down, they moved closer to it, appearing relieved. They drew back once more when Kai, who was increasingly bothered by what was happening, scowled at them.

Kai had a feeling that the macaque named Shendor, the male who'd been placed under so many curses that he'd transformed, must have been engaged in evil behavior on the battlefields to the north. When he tried to get away, Kai pinned him down with one leg. Wise Princess's followers laughed at Shendor's predicament and openly insulted him, making it clear that they had absolutely no sympathy for him. Kai caught the word "prince" among the insults and realized that this macaque was a member of the royal family just like Wise Princess.

Wise Princess had stolen the ritual's power and manipulated the deuswulf into wreaking destruction. If this was her brother, then it was likely that he'd used similar, shameless tricks. As Kai thought about how Shendor must have lived his life up to that point, he increased the pressure of his foot on Shendor's stomach.

Wise Princess looked Kai in the eye.

Deep within a firmly-made iron helmet that was wholly unlike macaque craftsmanship, Kai saw two eyes that he might have taken for human if this was

any other place. Her eyes looked sharp, and she regarded Kai coldly before looking down at her brother who lay at Kai's feet.

"You must excuse me, Shendor."

A look from Wise Princess made her followers return to her, and with a swish of the leather cape that hung down to her waist, she headed deeper into the cavern toward the throne. Kai warned her, "I'll kill him," but her response was merely, "Do as you will."

Shendor struggled violently on realizing he'd been abandoned, but a single punch from Kai was enough to leave him unconscious. After being unable to consume the godstone he'd recovered, Kai's stomach was grumbling loudly.

"Where are they going, old man?"

"They steal king god."

When Torud realized what Wise Princess was doing, he began to scramble up the stone table. Wise Princess and the others were on a level just ten yules higher up. There were signs of a struggle as Torud must have quickly caught up to them, but it was many against one, so the outcome of the fight was swift. Kai did not doubt that Torud had been held back.

If this was the royal palace, then the all-important gravesite of the king god must be somewhere within, just as it was with human castles. It was easy to guess that location was somewhere behind the king's throne.

Kai had no particular interest in who became the king or queen of the macaques. His only thought was that whoever wanted the job should take it.

No one showed any concern for the prince, and he wasn't seen as a hostage. The way he'd slaughtered his own kind after transforming into a diabo had been a horror to behold, and he was now regarded with contempt. But after everything that had happened, Kai had no desire to kill yet another macaque.

Kai took his foot away, and Shendor went chasing after his sister with his back hunched over.

"The diabo was slain by your protector, the king of valley!"

They had been left behind before any victory had been announced. The koror

felt as though it should be their lord that was receiving praise, so it was Porek who stepped forward and spoke out as their representative. Soon after, other soldiers also raised their own cries.

“It was the protector who slayed it!”

“Glory to the kingdom of the valley!”

“Long live our king!”

“Long live Kai!”

The macaques who’d watched the koror celebrating finally realized that their species had won, and they began to celebrate, with many of the macaques in black joining them. Their cheers combined to create a thunderous roar that filled the cavern.

Many of the macaques swung around the axes they carried as weapons and danced madly. There were some macaques in black who had climbed on to the stone table to follow after their absent leader. One of those who’d left first was the young male soldier who had been outdone after picking a fight with Kai.

A swarm of macaques had gathered around Kai. They were all crying out, “Our protector!” and trying to grab his arms and legs.

Kai had been waiting for an opportunity to finally eat some more of the cakes Porek was carrying, so he was angrily trying to hit the macaques away, but that wasn’t enough to discourage them. They grabbed Kai’s small body and lifted him high into the air.

When he realized that they were lifting him up in celebration, Kai smiled as he gave in to the exhaustion that finally got the better of him. It was good to finally relax.

In this world, strength was righteousness.

Some of those that lifted him up had been macaques in black. He saw the commander that he’d argued with at the entrance, and it made Kai laugh from his stomach as they were throwing him into the air.

It was then that Kai felt their mission to slay the diabo was truly finished.

A quarter of a toki later, the macaques had appointed themselves a new queen.

This was of course Wise Princess, who now had the king god dwelling within her. A meeting between her and the protector, Kai, began with Kai being surprised from behind.

Kai had been so careless that Zayena was able to put the tip of her dagger to the area just below Kai's shoulder blade. Either Kai's skin was tough enough to repel the attack, or the attack had been non-serious, because he was not wounded at all. "Your defenses are weak," was her poor assessment of him, and it was clear in the way Kai scowled that this bothered him. Kai then responded by cutting Zayena's dagger down the middle with his invisible sword.

Its cutting power seemed to impress Zayena. She ran her finger along the cut to determine its smoothness before throwing away the useless half-dagger.

"You used this same trick in the battle."

"Yeah, what about it?"

"They call you Protector, but I need to ensure you're the real thing. Don't be so angry."

"Are you trying to kill me?"

"You wouldn't die quite so easily, Protector."

"..."

The two continued to look at each other as their conversation stopped. Zayena's followers were trying to put pressure on him with statements like "How dare you?" and "Kneel before her." Kai completely ignored them. Zayena herself wasn't demanding anything from him.

Those with royal status did not kneel. Zayena did, however, begin what appeared to be a formal macaque greeting. She took Kai's hand and acted as if she was grooming his fur. She did this even though there wasn't actually any hair on Kai's arm to groom.

Next, Zayena presented the nape of her neck from beneath the iron helmet, thus exposing a vital part of herself. Kai was being silently pressured to groom

her. Members of the macaque royalty had long white fur, but they were even more unique in that the fur around the head was more like human hair.

Kai's eyes darted about with indecision, but the macaques around him weren't going to allow him to ignore her greeting. He had no idea what he was doing, but he pretended to groom her anyway. With that, the greeting between the two finally came to an end.

"Although I asked for nothing from you, it is fact that you have slain an evil god. I thank you as our queen. Is there anything you would ask of me?"

Essentially, now that she was established as queen of the species, she wanted to solidify her image as their ruler in the minds of the macaques from important tribes. If someone was going to grant a favor to the benefactor of their species, it would be fitting for the queen to do this, rather than the abridor. That was the point she wanted to make.

There was some commotion from the back of the crowd, which probably came from the abridor faction. He thought they might even have been the macaques he'd encountered before coming here: the members of the southern tribe that had waged war with Lag.

They wanted it to be known that they were the ones who deserved credit for finding someone who could help, but it was all the same to Kai. All that mattered was that he'd won the fight and maintained his honor as their protector.

"State your wish. Whatever it may be, I will grant one request."

When Zayena said this, there were gulping sounds from her associates gathered behind her. These included the young soldier who was infatuated with Zayena, and he looked at Kai like someone watching the movements of an enemy.

When Kai remained silent Zayena repeated the same words. When she said the words "whatever it may be" once more, Kai mustered up his courage.

"It can be anything?"

"Whatever you wish."

Kai thought about it for a moment and then said, “Let that white thing go.”

The white thing was of course the deuswulf.

After being weakened, the deuswulf had been dragged out of Dehoushi by its handlers, and Kai hadn’t seen it since. Kai argued that it should be treated better in recognition of its services, but the macaques remained arrogant and refused to listen. Kai had felt a genuine sense of friendship with the deuswulf and wanted it released as his reward.

For a moment Zayena looked as though she’d been caught off guard, but then she laughed softly, sounding very human. “This wish I cannot grant,” she said.

When Kai looked as though he wasn’t about to back down, Zayena had more to say.

“It has already broken free. Just now, it bit and killed one of its handlers before escaping and running for the lands in the north.”

“But how...”

“Did you not know? I, Zayena, am now queen of the macaques. The king god, that which our species worships, resides within me.”

“...”

“I have abandoned the power of the ritual. I no longer have use for that creature.”

It was at that moment that Kai remembered something, told to him by Porek, that all guardian bearers ought to know.

No one may have two guardians. Two gods could not reside within the one godstone. In other words, this female had used some trick to steal a guardian from another species in the north, and she hadn’t hesitated to dispose of it for the sake of inheriting the king god.

She abandoned her god...

Kai had just witnessed an example of it happening.

“Didn’t you think it might kill you after getting free?”

“If it wishes to kill me, it may try. I am queen of the great race of macaques.

Do you think I cannot handle an insolent beast from the north? But even such creatures are not immune to the curse of the land. After killing a handler, it even abandoned its dying pup so it might flee.”

Zayena laughed as if this was amusing, but there was an unmistakable madness in her eyes that made Kai doubt what she told him. The other self within Kai also agreed with that judgment.

A precious god, a god that brought with it a powerful beast servant, would not be so casually thrown away. The orphaned divine soul must have been inherited by someone else nearby. Kai knew that they would continue to use the deuswulf to wage war in lands to the north once more.

This woman’s cunning was beyond his reckoning.

He thought hard and tried to guess the “correct response” to her question. A somewhat unpleasant answer came to mind. Kai decided he would do his best to resist that unhappy outcome.

He thought a little more. Rather than what he wanted, he thought about who he wanted to rescue.

“In that case, I’ll take the pup.”

Zayena was clearly taken aback by Kai’s request. Then she looked as if it displeased her. This was not the answer she had been hoping for.

A deuswulf pup so weak that it was close to death. If he was to be rewarded for his services, then this was all he wished for.

If it hadn’t been given a guardian yet, then it wouldn’t be bound to any land. He could take it back to the valley, and then release it once it was healthy. That was his plan.

The hostage that they’d used to drag the deuswulf so far from its homeland was sound asleep within the cage, its chest rising and falling as it breathed weakly. Kai took the cage and bent the bars with his hand before scooping up the deuswulf pup that was curled up inside.

Kai and his party of koror were invited to dine at a feast held by the queen, but they had to leave quickly because Kai had a sick patient to treat. This made

the queen angry once again.

What actually happened was that the queen challenged him to fight with the young males, who were all terribly angry for some reason, one after the other, and Kai felt as though they wouldn't allow him to refuse.

This queen must have been quite beautiful according to macaque standards. The males were all desperate to win her favor somehow, but none of them were a match for Kai, and all they showed to her was how much more powerful their protector was as he defeated them one after another.

With the queen continuing to watch him with an ominous gaze, he asked for some milk to give to the deuswulf pup. He found that he could throw his weight around to great effect among the macaques, and he had no trouble gathering up all the gear he'd need to take care of the pup.

"Wow, it's really drinking it."

Kai couldn't help but raise his voice when he saw the pup, which must have been quite hungry, sucking at the spout of the jug of milk.

There was also a merry celebration from the koror that were with him.

With that, Kai and his party left Heju while a large gathering of macaques saw them off.

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Now then.

It wouldn't be quite correct to say that Kai and the others went straight back to the nation of the valley after slaying the diabo.

Torud and other chiefs belonging to the abridor faction chased after them in desperation. Since these were the people who Kai had made a deal with in the first place, Kai agreed to pay the abridor one final visit.

Word must have already reached the Nenem tribe's village because they were already preparing for a feast despite the hardship they faced. In the end, Kai couldn't refuse, and they were kept there for a whole night.

Although the village was filled with starving inhabitants, food was brought from neighboring settlements on the abridor's orders, allowing them to prepare a feast grand enough to make the saliva of hungry macaques form a river. Liquor that must have been liberated from the stores of Dehoushi was also brought out.

Naturally, ingredients were limited, so there wasn't much variety to the dishes. It was mostly potatoes and beans that were either boiled or steamed with minimal seasoning, so it was all filling but not exceptionally tasty.

But Kai was used to simple food, and he filled his stomach without any complaints. They served precious liquor that smelled of honey and figs, which they all drank straight. As they became mildly intoxicated, it helped the conversations flow. Kai was able to drink heavily, probably because of the blessings that reinforced his body.

An old macaque shared the oral history of their people while friendly guardian bearers repeatedly described the exploits of past heroes who were the pride of their species.

The abridor had now recovered from the condition caused by the diabo, and he and Kai served each other from the same pot of liquor while the abridor explained the power structures of their species without keeping anything secret.

There were 48 tribes of macaques with a total of 20,000 members living in that area. Kai didn't even know how many humans there were living in the borderlands, so this number was more than he could imagine. The best he could do was to imagine how many villages like Lag that would be. It was well worth knowing that there were enough of them to take on many of the villages of the borderlands combined.

In its present state, the nation of the valley didn't even compare to villages with 1,000 inhabitants like Lag. The two species that had gathered around Kai didn't even amount to 200 people combined.

Although they had Kai as their king, Kai alone was exceptional, and anyone attacking while he was absent would be resisted by only a small, weak army. Kai realized that he had to think carefully about the difference in power between

the valley and neighboring species, or he'd eventually make a wrong decision that put them on the path to ruin.

While they were drinking together, he received a proposal from a tribe chief asking for a declaration of friendship, albeit a temporary one. Finally, the abridor, as the leader of the collected southern tribes, proposed that they would make yearly tributes to Kai as their protector if he would give them his backing in exchange. Kai accepted the proposal out of pure self-interest.

Thus, the nation of the valley established a friendship with the abridor who controlled more than half of the 20,000 macaques, which meant more than 10,000 macaques in the southern region.

The nation of the valley led by Kai thus increased its standing in the region. While the alliance of northern tribes appeared to have enthusiastically welcomed their new queen, the abridor and the southern macaque tribes now had the backing of a protector, which could not be ignored.

Strangely enough, this was what first caused the name "Protector Kai" to spread to the world of demi-humans in the north. At the same time, rumors that the god of the valley had found a new host, and that the current god of the valley had been chosen from among the weak koror, spread through the region.

It was this rumor that caused the oppressed and imperiled weaker species of each region to be drawn to the nation of the valley.

**

The reception from the macaques lasted from noon until night.

If nothing had stopped them, that gathering of heavy drinkers would have probably continued into the next day without trouble. The end of the banquet came when a group of females surrounded the banquet tables and pounced on the thoroughly drunk males. After they had taken several victims, the abridor announced the end of the gathering.

"Those potatoes weren't bad..."

"We give you some. But not so many it angers them. Forgive me."

The group of females had even the abridor scared. They were similar to what

Lag called the women's council.

The Nenem tribe was already low on supplies and full of hungry macaques, so the females didn't look willing to give away a portion of their dwindling supplies to the guests, no matter how important those guests were. From the point of view of the females, the males were like idiots who needed constant babysitting to stop them from using up everything.

"Please leave soon," the females urged them while smiling sweetly. It looked as though the original plan had been to give away a cart full of locally grown potatoes, but the amount that they actually gave to Kai was reduced to no more than a single gunny sack's worth.

"Next ten years, we give potatoes."

That was a reference to the tributes they'd mentioned.

Conditions were tough this year, and they had to make apologies. They promised that next year they'd also provide a cart filled with a vegetable known as taro that was the pride of their species.

There were many widows among the females, so they asked if Kai might take one as a concubine. This was the one offer he didn't hesitate to turn down. Aruwe and Nirun were already more than Kai needed, and he had no intention of taking in anyone else. And then there was of course the fact that these females were definitely not Kai's type.

They said their goodbyes in the traditional macaque style of pretend grooming, and then Kai departed from the region along with his party.

**

When the party arrived back at the valley, seven days had passed since their departure.

The koror and uzelles had waited impatiently for their master's return, and they caught the party off guard by rushing to greet them. Kai sacrificed Porek and the soldiers to the crowd as he used some quick movements to slip away and escape to his valley.

"Our God!"

He heard voices calling after him, but Kai still hurried on toward his cabin with only slight feelings of guilt. Up until entering the valley, a warm, sleeping ball of white fluff, the deuswulf pup, had been curled up in Kai's arms.

Aruwe must have heard all the noise outside because she came out of the cabin to greet Kai. Behind her, the uzelle girl, Nirun, also poked her head out soon after.

The wolf pup would not eat bean porridge or potato soup. Even putting some dried meat into its mouth didn't work. That left only one thing that they could use to feed this infant.

Kai impatiently lifted the pup in both arms and presented it to the two women of the cabin before making an unexpected and unreasonable request.

"Feed this thing your milk!"

The baby needed a mother, and that meant a female.

In the Nenem tribe's village, there had been a female with a newborn child who had offered to share some milk. But the pup had already grown teeth and had a bad habit of biting, so she'd ran off looking hurt.

Now it would be up to the women of the valley to do their best. Kai felt sure that these two girls could be relied on to fulfill his request. At least that's what he thought before making the request.

He had definitely not expected the two of them to turn bright red and then cower while covering their chests.



“Milk...?”

“My God, you...”

“Die! Please...”

Kai was still determined to get some milk for the pup, but when he kneeled down to examine the two girls, Nirun tried to hit him with a charging headbutt. Kai had no trouble defending against that. While the uzelle girl was in a humiliating pose with Kai gripping her horn firmly in one hand, Aruwe came rushing in and childishly scolded Kai with a chop to the forehead while shouting “No!”

They were quick to explain to him why his request wasn’t something he should ask of a girl who had no children and wasn’t even married. Kai’s remorse was deeper than the valley itself.

In the end he went looking for a woman with a child and his request was accepted by a woman from the uzelles. The uzelles produced a particularly good milk. There was no easy way to stop the pup from biting, so they decided that the milk would be fed to the pup using the jug with a spout that the macaque handlers had used.

“Now drink up.”

It must have been quite hungry because when it got close to the jug it obediently began to suck and drink from the spout. It must have become more relaxed when it started drinking because its small body then felt limp.

The pup then fell into a deep sleep in Kai’s arms. Aruwe and Nirun looked adoringly at its sleeping face and then looked at Kai as if they wanted to hold it too. Kai considered it for a few moments and then told them that he’d be leaving the pup in the care of the uzelle woman giving it milk, and that they were not to touch it.

At some point he hoped the pup would be fit enough to return to its own kind. This little thing would grow into a proud creature, and it wouldn’t be right for it to get overly familiar with people.

“You’ve got no milk and you can’t raise it in the cabin. Sorry for getting your

hopes up.”

“...”

“Master...”

Someone suddenly grabbed his sleeve and he looked down to see the koror girl with an awfully forced-looking smile on her face. For some reason the uzelle girl behind was rolling up her sleeves and giving him a serious look.

“Aruwe...?”

“You just have to ask, and we can fulfill your wishes,” Nirun said coyly.

“We can meet your expectations,” Aruwe added in tandem.

With a tug on Kai’s sleeve, Aruwe held up a small bag that contained some round, black pellets.

“It’s important to prepare for these things,” Aruwe remarked.

“Preparations...?”

“Master, try one!” Nirun urged him. “G-Go ahead!”

“This medicine will give you energy,” Aruwe nudged.

“Go ahead!”

“Swallow one!”

Feeling overwhelmed by their insistence, Kai swallowed a pellet like they’d asked.

Kai was so thickheaded that he thought it must have been a medicine for fatigue. Being a tough guardian bearer meant that he felt no need to be particularly cautious, and he gulped it down without any fear.

A moment later he noticed the way the two girls were smirking and he knew he’d made a mistake. But that type of medicine didn’t take effect immediately. The effect wouldn’t kick in for some time, so Kai was still confused by their improved moods.

After that, Aruwe prepared food that was nothing short of delicious, and Kai ate until he was full. He also had something to drink. His tea was soon replaced

with wine, but Kai didn't worry because he didn't easily get drunk.

Having satisfied his ravenous appetite, he felt more drunk than he'd expected. He stumbled into the cabin and curled up in bed together with the pup. As always, Elsa was there sleeping. She had lost much of her weight... but now her face had taken on a sort of ephemeral beauty. A strange feeling grew within Kai.

He stroked her cheek, but it wasn't enough, so he rubbed his own cheek against hers. Her body felt warm and soft, and for some reason, Kai felt himself tremble with some swelling of emotion. Kai's legs went weak as the wholly inappropriate feeling of lust grew. Then his legs gave way. He landed on his rear and noticed the two girls sitting politely in the cabin for some reason.

Before he could express his surprise, Nirun lunged at him. She rubbed her head against his chest and turned her eyes up to look at him expectantly.

It was at that point that Kai realized he'd fallen for the trap the two had laid for him.

"T-There's time," Aruwe said.

The girls had estimated how much "free time" Kai had been planning to spend in the valley. When Kai was too shocked to move, they must have taken that for consent.

"R-Right. You should take it easy here in the valley, Master!"

Aruwe turned bright red as she fidgeted and curled her own hair with her fingers. Kai wanted to tell her that she didn't have to force herself to do anything embarrassing.

Although they had him cornered, the thing that allowed him to keep his sense of reason was the sleeping Elsa, who had never left his sight. Kai pretended to be drunk on the medicine for a while and broke free each time they attempted to pin him down, but when they got the sash around his waist loose, he found himself in a disadvantageous position.

"We'll make children!"

"Let's just do it already!"

Although they were different species, they were still young girls, and these

weren't proper things for them to say.

The usual servant and master relationship had been turned on its head and Kai was starting to find it all very annoying. He finally stopped trying to act all calm and mature and fought back with magic. *Magic? In this situation?* Some unknown other self within Kai tried desperately to stop him, but Kai released his magic from his right hand without hesitation.

Fire magic? Of course not.

This was a type of magic that made people calm in an instant.

Cooling magic... Cold hand!

Aruwe's eyes were teary as Kai reached out to touch her. Then the feeling of his hand against the back of her neck caused her to jump back and fall over. She cried "Kyaun!" like a shocked lamb as she retreated, and then Nirun dived in just as anticipated.

She was covered in light fur from her neck to her back, so she had few vulnerable areas. She was holding out her chest to get his attention, so that was where Kai grabbed her.

"Cold! Hyah!"

The cold feeling made Nirun scream and then she fell backward onto the bed.

"Master..."

"Your hands are so cold!"

"It is winter, you know."

"It's warm here in the valley!"

"Master! You've used some trick, I know it!"

Then Kai backed out of the cabin while holding up his right hand, which was coated in cold, white air. He could feel the white ball of fluff that he held in his left arm squirming, and he remembered the milk that the uzelle woman had given him before hurrying out of the valley. With no thought for his pride or reputation, he fled at full speed.

At the valley's edge, a feast was being held to welcome back Porek and the

soldiers, and to thank them for their hard work. When Kai leaped into the light of their bonfires and drew near to the feast, everyone heard the shouting from the two girls chasing after him, leaving Kai lost for words for a few moments. “I’ve changed my mind. I’ll join you,” he told them before joining everyone.

Some of his people realized that Kai was considering running away again because he’d realized that the two girls were right behind him. They took the opportunity to make fun of him.

“Our god is defeated!”

“The secret to a long peace is to keep the men under control!”

There were both koror and uzelle, men and women, enjoying the banquet. Kai noticed that sitting beside Porek was the smiling miao merchant, Fluu, who happened to be visiting.

“Master.”

“Hide me, gramps.”

The only building fit to shelter a human like Kai in the koror settlement was Porek’s house.

At Kai’s insistence, Porek smiled wryly and stood up. When he heard the voices of the persistent girls approaching, he casually asked, “Is my granddaughter not to your liking?”

Kai was in a hurry and was about to get impatient, but then he was caught off guard when Porek appeared to remember something.

“That reminds me. The human hostage that you left in our care is still in there.”

Kai had completely forgotten about her himself.

Now he remembered her.

The only thing that had made it possible for Kai to make a long trip away was the idiot daughter of the baron.

Fortunately, that idiot daughter was also being taken care of by Porek. Porek

was pointing to a separate structure that looked like an extension to his house.

Porek's house had been made by hollowing out the trunk of a large balen cedar, and for koror that was a good size, but for humans it felt a little cramped.

The door to the extension was barred, but the dim interior could be seen through a little window.

Through that little window, which might have been big enough for a koror to crawl out of, there was a shocked face looking his way.

Kai hastily put the removed mask back over his face and looked at the girl through the window. The freckled girl within was not particularly beautiful, which wasn't to say that she didn't at all compare to other girls, but just that she had rather average looks. Obviously, the majority of village men who were shunned by women would have thrown themselves at her without a second thought.

In front of her stood Kai, dressed as a koror soldier.

"Who... are you...?" she asked softly.

Thanks to the effect of the medicine, what Kai saw was a girl who looked about 50 percent more attractive than she actually was, looking his way with upturned eyes.

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A full seven-day cycle had already passed since the day Kai had left Lag.

Kai had gotten used to living as a demi-human, and now it felt a little unnatural to be going back to his true home in the human village.

He reminded himself that he had to go back to the village eventually. He surprised himself a little by the way he was thinking.

As for Aruwe and Nirun's attempts to chase after him, they were greeted by lukewarm stares from members of their own kind once they reached the edge of the valley and had retreated leaving nothing behind besides one last resentful cry of "Master..." The way they became self-conscious when they realized they were drawing attention made it seem as though they were both

still naive girls.

That gave Kai some relief, but Kai's troubles with women were far from over. A new "trouble" had come back to haunt him after he'd carelessly allowed himself to forget about her.

Lana, the second daughter of Lag's baron, Moloch Vezin.

"D-Don't kill me." The girl was blindfolded when they brought her out of the cabin.

Now that her role as a hostage was over, Lana could be returned to the village. She'd been blindfolded using an old koror sash wrapped around her head many times.

This was an obvious precaution to hide the location of the valley, but she'd fought with all her might to stop herself being blindfolded, thinking she'd be killed.

The spectacle had given Kai a sense of déjà vu. When livestock were killed in the borderlands, their eyes were covered so that they'd have no fear of death.

They should have said something to her first, but it was too late by the time they realized that.

She must have barely had need to work her muscles as a lady of a lord's household, but once she let loose, her strength was still enough to push back the ordinary koror who were surrounding her. Even though they only had to hold down one young girl, it quickly became clear that Porek himself needed to get involved.

Once her hands were tied behind her back and her eyes covered with a tight blindfold, she began screaming that she didn't want to die. She finally wet herself when Kai put her over his shoulder.

Some of the koror urged Kai to change his clothes when they saw him soaking wet and steaming, but he only shook his head and sighed because it felt like it would just add to the trouble. "I'll get this over with first," he said, getting to work.

Kai was able to move with the same agility even while carrying someone over

his shoulder, and he advanced through the dark forest like the wind.

The girl gave out the occasional scream and kicked her unbound legs now and then, most likely because she felt an intense feeling of falling. The warm urine had quickly chilled and turned to ice in the winter wind.

At first, she had repeatedly begged for her life with pleas such as “spare me” and “don’t eat me,” but after half a toki of traveling she must have come to accept her fate because her body went limp against Kai’s shoulder. Kai could have gotten out of the forest in half the time, but it took longer because he followed an indirect course, going one full circle around the lagarto marshland, to confuse her sense of direction.

When he left the forest, he kept going until they’d reached a place where Banya, which would have served as a landmark, was out of sight. Then he finally lowered her to the ground and removed the blindfold.

In the end, rather than being killed, her blindfold was removed and she was told “go home” in a distinctly human voice. She knew nothing about demi-humans, but she saw that Kai was about the same height as a human, so she naturally assumed he was human.

“Get going. You free now.”

Kai pretended to struggle with the human tongue as he pointed in the direction of the village. When first told to leave, the girl looked about her in confusion, then she stared at Kai.

“Did you just rescue me?” she asked in surprise.

Kai realized that the disguise that he’d come to rely upon now carried a funny smell as he put his nose close to the area that had gotten wet. When Lana, the second daughter of a baron, realized that the liquid was her own urine, she frantically waved her hands in front of her face while trying to explain herself.

Being his usual thickheaded self, Kai continued to smell his clothing, so she threw a snowball that landed at his feet. When he scowled at her, the next one hit him right in the face.

“Is that what you’re into? Gross!”

“What gave you that idea?”

Fearing being labeled a pervert, Kai rather insensitively told her “it stinks,” and then he was hit with another snowball.

Lana remained standing still on the snowy plain under the night sky. She looked at Kai’s pointing finger in confusion as she exhaled a breath of white cloud.

She was looking at his pointing finger as if it was meant for someone else, but then she realized what the person standing in front of her was asking her to do.

“You can’t be serious.”

It was unusual to expect a young girl, unsure of her surroundings, to walk across a cold plain covered in snow on a dark night. Lana wanted to make sure that the mysterious boy was aware of that fact. She also thought she’d win Kai over with her sex appeal, which she’d overestimated to a fair extent, and that left Kai not knowing where to look.

Her attempts at seducing Kai actually looked rather infantile, and Kai would normally have laughed out loud. However, at that particular moment it presented a problem.

Lana’s unfounded self-confidence only grew when she saw Kai become so flustered that he covered his eyes with his open palms and then looked away. She had probably spent each day toying with the foolish stable boy in the same way up until he helped her run away.

“Which village are you from?”

“...”

“I’m from Lag. Don’t let my looks fool you, I’m the daughter of a baron. A noble lady.”

If he abandoned her right there after going to so much trouble to rescue her from her evil captors, he might regret missing his chance with such a special lady for the rest of his life... or at least that was what Lana very clearly wanted him to think. She was right to point out that most poor villagers would never get a chance to get so close to a noble lady, and most probably wouldn’t have

missed the opportunity to ask for some favor. But Kai had already chosen himself a wife and had another two unwanted wives to boot. That was quite enough for him already.

In ordinary circumstances, he never would have felt such a strange sense of attraction towards her.

Oh man. She's making me dizzy.

At that particular moment, Kai was still under the effects of the medicine that the two girls had expertly concocted. The responses she provoked from him were excessive in various ways.

As Kai struggled to fight off the feelings of lust growing inside him, Lana knew that she had him right where she wanted him. "Don't tell me I'm not your type?" she said while very deliberately looking at him with upturned eyes.

"I get it," Kai said, letting his tongue slip, "you're pretty."

"Really?"

"Y-Yeah..."

"Hehe. Oh my."

As much as Kai hated knowing that she had him in the palm of her hand, it was hard for him to ignore his male instincts. So Kai finally gave in. A large part of it was that he didn't want her playing with his emotions any longer.

"I'll take you to the village," he told Lana.

Without speaking another word, he picked her up and put her over his shoulder like a piece of luggage. Lana resisted being handled so roughly, but Kai soon started to run.

After he'd been running for a while, Lana finally stopped screaming in his ear and fell silent. She relaxed against his shoulder and clung to him tightly. When they were halfway there, Lana looked more like she was hugging him.

Kai felt the warmth of her skin, the softness of her body, and the way her heart was beating rapidly like an alarm bell. At some point she had started to playfully bite his neck. He'd already been struggling to suppress his feelings, and this was getting a little much.

Kai had been too distracted to judge how much time had passed when they finally reached a place where Lag was in sight. When he put Lana down, he was dismayed to find the girl continued to cling to him.

Eventually he made Lana stand on her own two feet and told her once more: "Get going."

Lana took just one look at the village and then looked back at him with her face slightly red. The look in her eyes was enough to make Kai feel overwhelmed.

"Come meet my father."

"No. Just go."

"I want to thank you somehow!"

"I don't need thanks. Bye."

"Wait!"

Lana threw her arms around Kai and then tried to move the mask away from Kai's face. Kai grabbed her hand at the last second and then thrust her away.

"Don't you want me?!"

"...!"

The reason he turned back to look at the girl was that lust was building up inside him once again. Although he looked away quickly, an alluring smile appeared on Lana's face as she felt sure that this was her victory.

"Come to the village."

"No. Go home."

"I won't! I said wait! Listen!"

She sighed as if letting him know that he was a difficult man to deal with, making Kai also grow tired of the situation.

"Tell me what village you're from," she demanded as Kai ignored her and turned to walk away.

She was asking for the human village that Kai belonged to, but Kai was acting

as a koror soldier, so he told her, “Hacar.”

“I’ve never heard of it. Where is it?”

“Far away.”

“Oh, is it really?”

At this point there was already a serious misunderstanding between the two.

“Are you a guardian bearer? Not that it matters. If I can’t go to the banquet, then I’d be happy just to find someone I get along with.”

“...?”

“You’re a little rough around the edges, but I don’t mind that. At least try talking to my father.”

“...??”

When Kai lost all interest and turned his back to her, Lana threw a snowball at him. When Kai still didn’t turn around, she started to sound more demanding.

“Look at me!”

Kai looked back once more without trying to hide his irritation, and he promised himself this was the end of it.

“Thank you for rescuing me! See you around!”

She gave Kai a kiss on his mask.

The Winter Solstice Banquet

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The lady who'd been missing had returned.

There was no way that the village could remain calm after the lady who everyone had given up on had made it back to the village on her own two feet in the middle of the night.

It had been more than 10 days since her initial disappearance. It required miraculous luck for someone to make it home by wandering around outside while the winter weather grew worse and there were no resources to be found. The villagers must have had a hard time accepting it. Without some sort of intervention, the girl should never have made it back herself.

"I was held captive in the forest," the victim herself, Lana, told them.

A lot of people knew exactly how captive women and children were treated by demi-humans, so they grimaced at the thought of the horrific treatment the lady of their lord's house must have endured, and they cried to think of the high price she'd paid for her foolishness.

Not a single person expected that she'd come back still a maiden. They just thought it fortunate that she'd made it back alive and decided not to make the girl revisit any unpleasant memories that she'd rather forget. Lana's carefree response to their attitudes was to think, "Thank goodness no one's mad at me." But the lukewarm treatment she received from those around her was their way of very carefully helping Lana return to the way of life in the village.

After that day, the lady was hidden away under the protection of the lord's household where she was kept out of sight of the villagers. It ceased to be a topic of conversation in the village before long because it was accepted as the right thing to do.

The first thing she'd felt was a pain so subtle it was barely there.

Lilisa felt a feeling of warmth that accompanied the pain as she watched the shadows of the forest move across the snow all day long.

Although several days had gone by since he had left, she still continued to think of him, with each moment feeling endless. Her only wish was for his safety.

"I work in the castle, so that makes me an adult now."

Since getting hold of the cough remedy, her mother's symptoms had eased considerably. She would take Lilisa's hands and rub them. Lilisa's work had been washing and scrubbing ever since she was born, leaving her hands dry and cracked. Lilisa felt embarrassed whenever anyone touched them. But her mother told her that those hands should be her pride.

"You're acting all grown up all of a sudden."

"Mom, please! Go to bed already."

Whenever she returned from her duties in the castle and was greeted by her childhood friends in the longhouse, they would all tease her about the way she acted all grown up. She would puff up her chest dramatically and make the younger ones laugh by telling them, "It's because I don't get any time to play!" It was true that she had no spare time for play, and she was exhausted each day when she got home, but the older ones would laugh at her saying, "As long as you keep complaining like that, you're still a child." Now that Lilisa was an adult, she didn't want to show any weakness to the children of the longhouse who would someday work alongside her.

Lilisa knew her mother had told the others about her attempts to act mature. At one point her mother grabbed her by the nose and told them, "She already found a boy she likes."

That made her face turn red.

Her mother also noticed when she instinctively tried to hide the hair ornament with her hand. She didn't have the courage to admit that it was from her older sister's missing lover.

Several more days passed.

When she left to go to the castle in the morning, there were many busy women rushing around even though she was there earlier than usual, and she was told off for being late even though she wasn't.

When she thought this unreasonable and asked for an explanation, she was told that the lord's daughter who that boy had been searching for had returned alone in the middle of the night.

Although the lord's household didn't speak of it, everyone knew how the missing lady had convinced a stupid boy to take her away from her home. She'd ran away from home after throwing a tantrum and insisting they take her to the banquet through the deep winter snow, so there was no denying that the girl had been lacking in common sense.

At first, the servants referred to her as the "unfortunate lady" as they exchanged whispered rumors. But then there had been a great fuss the previous evening when the lady miraculously returned to the castle and demanded a hot bath along with warm wheat gruel with queijo. After that, she had earned herself the nickname Lady Moron. The lady was already resting in her bed once Lilisa arrived.

Lilisa was quite persistent in her questions about the boy who'd gone after the lady.

Lady Moron had returned to the village by herself, they told her. In other words, she had not come back with an escort.

After risking his life to find her, the two had crossed paths without ever meeting. Now, the boy was still wandering around the forest in search of a foolish lady in the harshness of winter. The thought made it hard for Lilisa to suppress her anger as she snatched up a bucket from some resting servants and went off to clean the lodgings.

In the lodgings, the two traveling priests were already out of bed and were hastily preparing themselves for a journey.

"Are you going to leave while there's still snow?"

The priests looked at Lilisa when she spoke and, for just a moment, they did

not look pleased to see her. Then they both smiled at her in a way that looked terribly forced.

“No, we will return shortly. I expect we shall be back by evening.”

“Running through snow is another part of our training. Our bodies would grow weak if we were to remain here in these lodgings.”

“Oh, I see.”

The two priests left while Lilisa began her cleaning. But then, Lilisa paused in her work and watched them leave. Her intuition told her something wasn't right. She abandoned her work for the time being to chase after them. They said they were training, but that sounded so unlikely.

It was as she expected.

From the top of the wall she watched them run across the plain, through snow that was undisturbed save for a single trail of footprints that they were following. Those footprints undoubtedly belonged to Lady Moron.

Far beyond the trail of footprints, the forest was visible.

She felt a tightness in her chest when she thought that the boy might be in that forest. She imagined him going to great pains to carry out his duty, without knowing that there was no lady there for him to find. Her anger toward Lady Moron grew uncontrollable once again.

Her sister's grave also had to be somewhere in that forest. She felt restless and trapped, as though the village of Lag was not just a safe cradle, but also a prison. She could hardly bear to be such a powerless child.

Without thinking, Lilisa took some snow in her hand and threw it with all her strength. But it was a ball of snow, thrown by a weak girl, so it barely carried any force at all.

The ball of snow flew up into the sky where it was momentarily lit by the dawn sun, and then it broke apart in the sunlight. Fragments of scattered ice glistened like sparks in the light of the sun.

The two traveling priests never did return that day.

She had thought she'd give him a proper welcome when he returned.

She wasn't ready to put the matter of her sister behind her, but she didn't want to bother the boy with any more of her delusions about him hiding her sister somewhere outside the village. She decided that she would thank him for the hair ornament when she next saw him.

And then he did return.

She heard that his fellow soldiers had given the boy a rough welcome and then told him that the lady he'd been looking for had come back on her own. He'd dropped to his knees in tears when he found out. His rage flared up every time someone teased him about his wasted time. Before Lilisa could find him, they'd led him away to see the baron. He didn't return to the barracks.

Although he'd failed, he had been risking his life to find the girl. The women in the castle shared rumors about how the baron must be rewarding him for his efforts. All jokes aside, the forest was a dangerous place, and he'd survived there for 10 days in the harshness of winter. It was proof that the strength that the people in the borderlands relied upon was something the boy had in abundance.

The men might have enjoyed laughing at his failure, but the women saw that he was twice the man that they were, increasing their estimation of him even further. Everyone watched him very closely, knowing that he'd lost his lover Elsa and was now single.

Even Lilisa, who'd just turned 13 that year, understood the significance of that.

The women had a fundamental need for men. For example, they needed people they could rely on to obtain food no matter how tough the situation, and people strong enough to protect the weaker women from dangerous outsiders.

If the worst happened and the village was raided by demi-humans again the next day, everyone would become scattered, but that boy would survive no matter what. Men with that level of reliability were ideal in the eyes of the women of the borderlands.

The boy had proven that he met this standard. Lilisa trembled when she thought of how there would be competition over him. But even so, she wouldn't back down. The boy cared for her enough to give her the hair ornament. She knew he would notice her. She knew he would see the hair ornament and tell her how much it suited her.

Most importantly, she was the young sister of his previous lover, so she believed that her looks would match his preferences.

There were many women who hadn't chosen a partner yet waiting for the boy to appear from the third floor of the lord's home. There were several women impatiently watching the staircase. Lilisa was one of those women. At times like this, it was the women who attended to the baron's family directly who had the advantage. They would go up and down the stairs to carry out their duties, and they'd look down triumphantly on the other women as they did it. The fortunate thing was that most of the women serving as maids were appointed because of their experience, and even if they were single, they were all fairly old.

Lilisa stayed behind a little longer after her daily duties were finished. The day grew late and she was beginning to worry about her sickly mother when the boy finally came walking down the steps.

His pale red hair swayed as he made his way down the stairway. Lilisa was about to walk over but then she stopped and gasped with surprise. For a moment, she hadn't even recognized her own voice.

She looked and saw that the baron, Lord Vezin, was walking alongside the boy as if the two were old friends. Meanwhile, even Lady Falda and her children remained a respectful distance behind.

It made sense. The boy who'd risked his life to enter the forest and rescue their daughter had also received gratitude from the girl's mother. As if drawn in by some irresistible force, more women gathered and could do nothing but quietly bow as the baron's family passed them by. Lilisa also bowed while hiding behind the backs of other women who'd kept their distance. There was little chance that anyone noticed her.

She looked down at the ground in frustration as the baron's family walked off.

Then the quiet whispering of the other women caught her attention.

“That means the rumors are true.”

“Can you believe it? He’s going to marry into our lord’s family.”

“Isn’t that farfetched...?”

“Anyone can see that the boy’s not a child anymore. It all makes sense to me.”

“When they say one of Lady Falda’s children... does that mean...?”

She could feel herself going pale.

She didn’t know how to join in when the other women gathered to share their thoughts. Some women walked away with their hopes dashed, but some of them noticed little Lilisa making herself even smaller in the corner. They laughed and said things like, “He’s got the little kid interested in him.”

Little kid...

It was true that, before she’d started working in the castle, she’d run around and played with the other children in the longhouse. But that was the past. She was doing her best to look like one of the adults busy at work around her. But it turned out that the only reason she’d felt like one of the adults was because she hadn’t understood her place.

As she left the castle, her body stiffened with embarrassment and she wished she could just disappear. The sun had fully set, and there was very little light to illuminate her way as she ran.

As she passed through the castle entrance, she collided with someone. She realized that the figure stumbling backwards was the taller of the two priests.

“Oh, mister priest.”

“Ah, the girl taking care of us.”

Even in the low light, the priest’s wounds were heavy enough to see. One of his arms hung limp at his side, but the other arm carefully supported the smaller of the two priests who he carried on his back.

Traveling priests generally went to various places without carrying any

possessions, so they relied on their refined martial arts. The larger of the priests looked particularly burly and probably was a skilled fighter, but with the heavy wounds that covered his body, it was a miracle that he was able to walk home.

“I have asked the guards, but perhaps you could send word to your lord asking that he spare with us some medicine.”

Lilisa’s desire to ask what in the world had happened to them in the forest must have shown on her face. She had seen them leaving after all. The priest didn’t try to keep secrets: “We were set upon by some rather troublesome apes.”

All of those working the day shift were returning home around that time, so others on the same shift came by and helped carry the wounded priests to the lodgings. The baron himself decided to visit them while they rested in their beds.

The women attending to the lodgings ended up having to nurse them. Fortunately, Lilisa was able to ask another woman to check on her mother in the longhouse, so Lilisa was able to remain there without feeling too worried.

“I managed to get hold of the baron.”

“Stand quietly.”

The baron appeared with several others in attendance.

Lilisa had to stop herself from crying out.

It’s him...

They must have been together the whole time. The boy was there looking slightly uncomfortable at the baron’s side.

The greenhorn, Kai.

Despite the dreadful state of the priests, Lilisa couldn’t take her eyes off the boy. She felt a prickling pain in her chest.

Lilisa held her breath and watched as the boy looked down at the two priests who were lying in their beds before him.

When the annual harvest was over and people made offerings to the land gods, this time was known as the month of offering.

This was supposedly a dry season preceding winter, during which the approach of the winter could be enjoyed in modest luxury with good food and wine. But unlike the warm lands of the center, the borderlands to the north were already well into winter by then, and they commonly referred to this season as the solstice month.

Likewise, the winter solstice banquet held in the provincial capital of Baltavia had once been known as the banquet of offering, but those with deep roots in the borderlands paid no attention to the original name. Not even Count Balta used the old name in his invitations, so it was inevitable that it would be forgotten.

They departed on a day in the month of offering.

Many people from the village were there to see them off as the group left Lag to head for the provincial capital.

The group had four members in total. Lord Vezin of House Moloch, his oldest son Olha, his first daughter Jose, and one greenhorn they'd recruited to single-handedly carry their luggage, known as Kai.

Olha had quipped that if Kai was so proud of his own strength, then he should have no trouble carrying all of their luggage. When all of the luggage was loaded onto Kai's back, he did indeed carry it with ease. This made Vezin laugh and declare, "Then it's decided," thus making it officially Kai's job.

While the other three were traveling light with just their valuable belongings tied to their backs by tasuki cords, Kai was not only carrying a trunk complete with a luggage rack, but also an extra-large rucksack stuffed full of items such as Lady White's formal clothing wrapped in oil paper, 10 drums of locally-produced queijo to give as gifts, a tent for camping, and their food supplies. It was all several times bigger than he was, making him look like an ant carrying something off to its nest.

Carrying it all was one thing, but the amount of weight on Kai's back made it

inevitable that he'd sink completely into the snow. Although the snow on the ground wasn't particularly deep, it was deep enough to reach his knees and make walking more difficult.

But Kai had decided that he wouldn't complain about such problems. If he sank into the snow, he'd just have to force his way through it. They did of course have gear similar to snowshoes to prevent them from sinking, but even with those on, Kai was still sinking.

"You must still be tired, Kai," Lady White said. "If you're having trouble, just say so."

Even under her warm robes with plentiful fur, Lady White's pale features and her clear voice were enough to betray her beauty. Not long had passed since their departure from the village, so she was still in good spirits. Each time they exhaled, their breath would form white clouds as it came into contact with the freezing cold air.

Kai had returned to the village just two days before their departure. The lady he'd been searching for had made it back to the village without him, which meant that Kai must have risked his life and went through many hardships as he wandered the forest for no reason. Some had openly laughed at his efforts out of jealousy, and Kai had felt down due to his wounded pride for a time, but now he was already returning to his usual self.

The baron laughed as he led the way, leaving a trail of white clouds from his mouth.

"Let's see what it takes to make you too tired to worry about others, Jose!"

"Father."

"Keep up with me," the baron ordered.

"Olha! Take up the rear!"

"Please," Olha begged, "do not get carried away."

Even when his eldest son tried to discourage him, the baron ignored his words. They all worried what he might do next.

The baron's back suddenly flew into the air. They were witnessing a quart sigil

guardian bearer unleash his body's power.

"Father!" Olha called after him. "Let's go, Jose!"

"All right!"

Kumadori soon appeared on the faces of Olha and Lady White as they imitated their father's movements. Kai frowned at the clouds of snow dust they sent flying toward him. He would have run after them, but his heavy luggage caused his feet to be caught in the snow.

Kai was very quickly left behind. He sighed, but still only unleashed an amount of power that kept his kumadori from showing as he trudged on after them.

Kai walked slowly compared to the members of the baron's family, but he still moved with more speed than any ordinary human. They weren't walking through a snowstorm, so the rough trails the three left behind wouldn't disappear quickly, and there was no danger of Kai losing his way.

Nevertheless, Kai looked for ways to make the journey easier. The baron scattered a lot of snow as he moved, leaving particularly large footprints behind. Those could be recycled to help Kai avoid sinking into the snow.

I guess I'll go from one hole to the next...

Above Kai's head, in a sky filled with flecks of powdery gray snow, a solitary silhouette of a honk flew through the frozen winter air as he went from footprint to footprint.

The honk also appeared to be headed to some destination of its own as it flew straight through the gray sky.

**

Although the three guardian bearers of House Moloch were all traveling the 1,000 yulds to Baltavia together, they were making the entire journey on foot.

Winter brought deep snow, making horse-drawn carriages useless and travel very difficult. And yet, it was the one time that guardian bearers could leave their territories without anxiety. When snow brought the borderlands to a standstill, it brought peace with it.

Initially, they'd hoped that Lady White might get more accustomed to this

unfamiliar form of travel if they moved sometimes fast and sometimes slow. But once they were into the second day, they began to move at a steady pace because they worried that Lady White no longer looked steady on her feet.

The weather gradually grew worse. Halfway there, a terrible snowstorm picked up, making it difficult to see the way ahead. They spent that time in a snow cave that they dug themselves.

If an ordinary person had tried to travel the incredible distance from Lag to Baltavia at this time of year, it would have taken them a month if they were lucky. If they were less fortunate, they would have died before completing the difficult journey. But the baron intended to make the journey in a single 7-day cycle, or 10 days at most. It truly was a punishing march that only a guardian bearer could have handled.

Villages in the borderlands were dotted around at such distances that an ordinary person could just about walk from one village to another in a day. A guardian bearer who cared to do so could visit other villages several times a day. There were numerous villages along the route they took toward the solstice banquet, and any of those villages would have been happy to welcome them as guests. However, Lag was one of the most distant domains, so the lord of every other village they drew close to had already departed for the provincial capital. They also had Lady White and Kai with them this year, neither of which were used to such journeys. They had departed a little in advance for that reason, but it made their journey slower.

I never thought we'd go this slow...

Guardian bearers rarely showed signs of fatigue.

But once they moved far away from the gravesite where their land god rested, a feeling of discomfort would fill their body as if they were someplace where they didn't belong. The urge to return home was hard to ignore.

The strange homesickness that Kai often felt, which drove him to make regular trips to the valley, was a symptom of this curse.

The curse of the land.

When they'd first set out, Lady White and Kai had been given warnings

because of their lack of experience.

It wasn't difficult to explain. The powerful blessings that hosts received from their land gods were granted so they could be kept as guards to protect the god's land. When the host made a journey like this one, it did not please the god.

Roughly three days after leaving the village, Lady White started to spend most of her time on the baron's back because she looked like she might collapse. For a guardian bearer, albeit a low-ranking one, to show the sort of weakness typically associated with ordinary women and children was another sign of the trip's impact on her mental state.

As they got further from the village, the feeling of homesickness continued to test them. The baron had told them that the feeling of homesickness would grow stronger as they moved further from their land, but eventually, they reached a point where it leveled off. Once their minds and bodies grew used to it, it became something that they knew they could easily endure in the short term.

It's like sea sickness, almost.

Kai's thoughts about the ill feeling were in completely the wrong order. Kai had never been to sea and hadn't experienced the loss of one's sense of balance that came from being on the water.

In any case, the homesickness affected everyone differently, and while Kai was somewhat fine with it, Lady White's symptoms were much more intense.

The point where discomfort formed a barrier had been reached somewhere between the second and third day after their departure, so it must have been when they were about 300 yulds from the gravesite, which would make that the limit of how far a guardian bearer could go while still feeling at ease.

It had taken two days to walk to the nearby macaque territory, but Kai estimated that they'd only traveled 100 yulds for that particular journey. Kai hadn't reached the barrier and so he hadn't felt any discomfort.

It was a little shocking that a demi-human nation was closer than the provincial capital, but in a sense that was just because of how vast the land

ruled by humans was. The borderlands alone were no doubt much more vast than the territory ruled by the macaques.

Lady White really should take a break soon.

His younger sister was the main concern, but Olha also felt a sense of nausea at times. He didn't let it show on his face, but he'd often spit. It wasn't something so excruciating that he couldn't grow to tolerate it given time.

Funny how I'm not suffering.

It was an opportunity for Kai to learn more about his extraordinary toughness.

Everything had to be down to the fact that the god of the valley was special. If that specialness was related to his role as an arbitrator and a protector, then the breadth of the land area a guardian bearer was connected to and the breadth of their limits of movement did not necessarily increase for higher-ranked gods.

They persevered with the long, long journey, and with each step they took, no matter how small, they moved closer to their destination.

They focused on keeping their feet moving through 10,000 paces, and through one hundred thousand paces, and the scenery around them gradually changed. It was several days into the journey when the vast, unchanging scenery of the borderlands began to change in a noticeable way.

The provincial capital was close.

It must have been about a cycle since their departure when they finally felt sure of it.

Beyond a particular point, the villages they saw were all quite large. This was clearly a safe area of land that was never invaded by outsiders, because the villages were so heavily populated that their borders included people living outside the village walls. The presence of the capital was rich in the air as they drew nearer.

Once they reached some particularly large settlements that felt more properly referred to as towns, the baron approached each one to pay his respects. This was how Kai learned that this group of towns in the center of the

borderlands was commonly known as the Holy Northern Crown. They were ruled by people close to Count Balta and had been built long ago during the age of colonization.

The fortified towns of the Holy Northern Crown that fully surrounded the provincial capital of Baltavia must have once formed a strategic bridgehead back when humans first conquered the borderlands.

When they made their final stay at one of those fortified towns, they finally were greeted by lords from other small villages, and some of them invited Kai's party to travel with them.

Baltavia was located further south than Lag, but it was still within the climatic region of the borderlands rather than that of the center. They faced a particularly violent snowstorm on the final day, leaving the collection of guests no time to admire the beauty of the provincial capital itself as they shielded their eyes from the blizzard and hurried through the gate to the city one after another.

The massive gate to the city was several times taller than the baron, who was rather tall himself, and it held a thick door, covered with iron studs, that was closed. The door was made from the wood of balen cedars, which could only be found in the borderlands, and opening it was only possible for someone in possession of a guardian bearer's incredible strength. Whenever lords visited the provincial capital, they would need to spend considerable energy passing through this front gate to prove the power of their guardian. There was another gate for commoners right by the main gate, but the baron had been more than happy to try his hand at the main gate, and he'd passed through without trouble.

The main gate was designed with a slight incline that caused the door to swing shut under its own weight unless held open. The large amount of luggage Kai was carrying turned out to be too much to fit through the commoner's gate, so he was forced to wait in line to attempt the main gate. The procession wasn't quite as smooth as he expected, and he ended up having to wait some time.

Guardian bearers had troubles of their own. While there were shining gold guardian bearers who lived up to the title and protected their people with their

power, there were many lower-ranked, rusted silver guardian bearers like Lady White whose guardian had weakened considerably. Many of those rusted silver guardian bearers didn't know when to give up, causing things to drag on considerably.

Eventually, the pestering from those in line behind would cause challengers to reluctantly withdraw. They'd walk alongside the line, headed in the opposite direction. About half of those would then rejoin the back of the line once again, not knowing when to quit.

"What are you doing in line?" Olha was one of those forced to withdraw.

He was covered in sweat and his shoulders rose and fell as he breathed, showing just how much he'd struggled with the gate.

Isn't Lord Olha a tres sigil? Kai wondered in surprise. Clearly, he still hadn't recovered from the curse placed on his gravesite during the battle to defend Lag. He was putting on a brave face, but the frustration was visible in his eyes.

"If it's too much, you shouldn't force yourself," Kai counseled him.

"I know that..." Olha replied before rejoining the back of the line. He was staying determined.

Lady White had no qualms about entering through the commoner's gate and was probably waiting with the baron already.

Kai's turn finally came around. Kai approached the massive door and held it with both hands. The iron studs of the gate should have been ice cold, but they were strangely warm. It was as if they had collected the heat of each challenger.

Kai collected up a small amount of strength. He was preparing himself for a difficult task.

All right. They're as heavy as they look. But...

They might have been heavy, but a small amount of strength had been enough to make the door move a little, so he knew instinctively that he could make it through.

While making sure not to use so much power that his kumadori would show, Kai refined the magic inside himself that made his body stronger and directed it

to where it would more efficiently increase the power in the muscles he was actually using.

He had enough weight to keep himself fixed on the ground. The luggage on his back was useful for keeping Kai's feet rooted to the spot.

He directed refined spiritual energy to his shoulders, to his upper arms, and then to his wrists.

Move aside.

Of all the challengers, Kai was by far the smallest. It meant that the strength he displayed was way out of proportion with his appearance, drawing gasps of astonishment.

For the crowd of people watching on the other side of the gate, it was clear that Kai had just pushed open the thick door with ease, despite his small stature. Waiting among the crowd were Lady White and the baron.

The fact that Kai was just a servant, rather than a noble, was obvious from the amount of luggage he carried on his back. That resulted in cheers of admiration from the crowd, and even some applause from curious passersby.

When Kai joined up with the baron, people were asking how a servant could be so strong and others were asking if anyone had seen a kumadori on his face. Among the voices in the crowd, someone was heard saying, "Ah, he's with House Moloch," as if this made it easier to accept.

Kai then realized for the first time that both the baron and Lady White were also gathering considerable attention from the crowd. This was to be expected now that the provincial capital had learned of Lag's victory against the great army of macaques.

House Moloch possessed an incredibly strong servant.

There was no doubt an unspoken understanding between the people present that Lag's miraculous victory, the likes of which had not been seen in years, was somehow related to this servant of theirs.

Meanwhile, Lord Olha's efforts had finally paid off. After rolling in through the gate, he walked on into Baltavia where he could meet up with the other

members of House Moloch.

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The winter solstice banquet.

The event was held annually by Count Balta, the warden of the borderlands, to ensure the strength of ties between the count and those who swore loyalty to him.

In the course of its expansion, humanity had exterminated other species and claimed a great northern territory so vast that it could have easily passed for a nation on its own. But the population had dwindled with each passing year, and the struggle to manage the human territory became more arduous as humanity declined. Without their close-knit ties, the lords of the borderlands would not be able to withstand the demi-human onslaught, so when more than 200 lords from across the borderlands gathered for the winter solstice, it was an important opportunity to ensure that their alliances were strong enough to see them through the coming year.

Once someone completed the trial of passing through the gate, their power as a guardian bearer was assessed, and those rated highly soon had a gathering of lords appear around them hoping to strengthen their ties.

The small group formed by House Moloch, which was led by the quart sigil known as the Iron Taurus, was quickly surrounded by the lesser lords they'd met on the road during the final day of the journey. All were demanding to hear more about the battle to defend the village that had happened about a month prior.

Lord Vezin had completed the trial of passing through the gate, his oldest son Olha had also passed through unaided despite his low-ranked sigil, and even the servant bearing their luggage had been able to pass through the gate. It was clear to everyone that this house had exceptional power despite ruling just one small village.

And this year, unlike other years, House Moloch had brought another attraction that was bound to gather a lot of attention.

“Well, well. I had heard many rumors.”

“Her skin is as beautiful as white snow.”

“I shall look forward to seeing your daughter in her formal attire!”

The silver-haired lady who'd been the talk of the borderlands' social circles and who was now reputed to be the most beautiful lady in a generation was none other than Lady White herself. She had not yet removed her traveling robes, so her head was still covered by her hood, but glimpses of her white face were enough to produce broad smiles from the leering men who made up the majority of the guests.

A lot of women would have been delighted to gather so much male attention, but that didn't appear to be the case for Lady White. Her face disappeared as she pulled her hood forward.

Obviously, just because they'd entered the capital didn't mean that there was a roof over their head. The scene was playing out in the middle of a whirl of light snow. Kai was still carrying heavy luggage on his back, so he was tempted to complain when they let the crowd stop them from heading straight on to their destination.

Besides a few newcomers, everyone knew exactly what had to be done when arriving at the provincial capital. The baron spoke with those who approached him as much as he needed to while continuing to walk away from the main gate and along the main street of the provincial capital.

Although there was little foot traffic in the snowy street, the open stalls standing side-by-side were enough to create the festival atmosphere of the winter solstice banquet. Here and there, stalls were serving enticing cups of hot liquid. As if they were late to a party and being forced to drink up, the baron led them over to one of the stalls that was producing rising steam and asked everyone to produce their cups. Cups were everyday pieces of equipment, and everyone was able to produce one from their pocket or some other place.

“We'll take four.”

“Would you like mantei with that?”

“Mantei and a good helping of ginger.”

Warm, light brown liquid was poured from the long spout of a kettle and then distributed to everyone. Once it filled a copper cup, it restored warmth to the fingers of whoever held it.

Kai savored the scent and then realized that this was tea. Tea in the borderlands was usually made by infusing grass, but this was different. This was real tea, which was said to be only available in the south of the country.

Naturally, Kai had never tasted it before.

It's like milk tea...

Those weren't words he should have known, but the words came to him nonetheless. He savored the sweetness and the rich flavor that came from the plentiful sugar it contained. This thing they called mantei appeared to be butter.

The baron treated all of the gathered lords to a cup of the same tea while they rested. It was a strange-looking scene, but the sight of people drinking tea at open stalls in winter did not seem to be so rare here in the provincial capital.

When invited guests with money to spare passed by, the stall owners stood to make a lot of money. The baron also treated them to some large buns filled with ground meat. When one was offered to Kai, he gave in to his hunger quickly and began taking large bites.

The meat buns were flavored heavily and were the most delicious thing he'd ever eaten.

This might be just as good as an onigiri.

Kai felt blissful as he chewed. The baron began walking once more without waiting for Kai to finish eating. Lady White had looked like she could have stayed there enjoying the warmth of the tea all day, but the baron wasn't one to remain still.

"That's the provincial castle."

Unfortunately, it was difficult to see it through the bad weather, but there were fires burning that made it possible to grasp the overall outline.

The outer walls that defended the capital looked ancient, and yet another castle wall marked the end of the town scenery. Deep within was a small, rocky

mountain forming a ridgeline with several fortresses built along it, and these fortresses were connected by stone staircases. At the peak was a massive structure that truly looked like a grand castle. Large and small spires with red rooftops gave it a stylish air that made Kai, a child from a remote village, feel out of place.

This was the provincial castle that they were headed for.

A large gathering of guests and guards had formed in front of the gate at the foot of the central mountain, which they'd have to pass through to reach the castle. The area was alive with activity as those passing through were inspected.

"Moloch Vezin, lord of Lag!"

The guards adopted a more respectful attitude when the baron announced himself and drew closer. Someone appearing to be their captain stopped talking to another guest he'd been dealing with and came running over. The captain checked the invitation that the baron showed him and then announced, "Lord Moloch is in attendance!" Well-dressed soldiers waiting to guide official guests inside then ushered the party in and led them toward the castle.

"Is it the third residence again this year?"

A soldier leading the way nodded apologetically in response to the baron's question.

"The banquet is just two days away, so the other residences are full with guests who have already arrived. Rooms are allocated on the basis of first arrival."

"It'd be nice to stay in the second residence someday. But Lag's just too far away."

"The earliest arrivals were here approximately half a month prior to secure rooms for themselves. I believe they wanted places in the second residence where they might be closer to the first residence."

It was surprising to hear that they'd been taking care of guests who'd arrived half a month early, but they seemed to be welcomed with open arms, which gave some idea of just how wealthy the count's house was. The treatment guests received depended on how early they arrived, rather than the status of

their house. The lords of the borderlands placed high value on their own autonomy, and this system was evidence they were essentially equals.

At the peak was the largest castle building known as the first residence, halfway down was the secondary residence, and then below that there was the third residence. “Folly is set in many high places,” or so they say. It was likely that many of those put up in the second residence wanted to feel high and mighty.

Lag was a long way off, and the third residence seemed to be the usual place for Lag’s people to stay.

“Lord Moloch! We shall speak more later!”

“I shall call for you!”

The lords who had accompanied them along the way said their goodbyes. The baron appeared to be popular wherever he went.

Once they were guided to the third residence, they found that all of the third-floor rooms were already occupied, so they took one room on the second floor. Even most of the rooms on the second floor were taken, and Olha breathed a sigh of relief and said, “Anything is better than the first floor.” Cold air would rise from the ground of the first floor during the winter, chilling the rooms on that floor.

The many rooms within the provincial castle appeared to be a remnant of the conquest of the north when guardian bearers from around the country had gathered together and stayed here. The rooms were big enough for a master and their servants to sleep in the same room, and the layouts appeared designed for this purpose.

Naturally, the largest bedroom went to the baron and Lord Olha, the next biggest bedroom was for use by Lady White alone, and the small third room was for the luggage bearer. Kai’s room was something like a closet near the entrance.

They didn’t mean to bully him, it was just that they had so much luggage that they wouldn’t have been able to unpack it all even in a fourth room. Kai was used to sleeping next to a bunch of other soldiers in the barracks, so none of

this bothered him in the slightest, but Lady White showed him concern and said, “If you find it too cramped to sleep, there is extra space in my room.”

Needless to say, that offer was out of the question.

Before leaving, their guides informed them that the solstice banquet was scheduled to start in two days’ time, and that food was prepared and brought to each room every morning and evening. The party started by unpacking the luggage they’d brought and hanging up their clothes so that they could smooth out the creases. It was evident that this building known as the third residence was not often used. It had been cleaned in preparation for the banquet, but there had been places left untouched that they still needed to clean themselves.

The lords from nearby territories might have been able to bring their attendants with them, but House Moloch’s only underling was Kai. Lady White offered to help him, but it still took more than two toki to wipe the whole place clean. The baron and Lord Olha soon left the room so that they could go around greeting people.

“I’m sorry. We’ve dragged you all the way to the provincial capital and now we’re making you clean.”

Lady White smiled despite the fatigue she must have built up during the long journey. She said she was going to lie down and then retired to her bedroom. She was soon fast asleep.

Kai put a blanket over her sleeping body while looking at the small amount of light coming through the glass window.

It was already getting quite dark outside, and night was clearly falling.

The thought made his stomach rumble. He’d been told that food would be brought to the room when it was ready, but there was no sign of that happening.

He waited for a while with an empty stomach. When the baron and Lord Olha finally returned, it had grown so late that any child would have been scolded for staying up late. They both carried a faint smell of alcohol as they fell into their beds.

The baron noticed the resentful look on Kai's face and asked him, "Didn't they bring you dinner?"

Kai shook his head.

"Because all these lords and nobles are so demanding!" the baron said with a laugh. "If you don't speak up, you'll be forgotten. You'd best visit the kitchen yourself and ask to be fed."

"..."

Apparently, they were inundated with requests for food while the baron had been holding his own personal banquet. The baron had known it might happen, which is why he'd given out tea and meat buns before they entered the provincial castle.

So that's what that was about...

Without a word, Kai stood and left the room while everyone else slept.

Kitchens everywhere were places that made use of fire and water, so they were invariably built on the ground floor. Kai heard merry voices coming from rooms here and there as he made his way down to the first floor. The area was a battlefield filled with warring servants. As Kai approached the sound of servants shouting out orders, he soon ran into an unexpected traffic jam.

The attendants of every lord must have gathered here so that their masters could order extra food. The clusters of attendants were also getting impatient because of how long it took to get served.

Kai resigned himself to waiting a long time and quietly joined the back of the line.

"Over here! I want that first!"

It was as though a large figure popped into existence before him, and then the line was pushed apart so someone could move to the front. It resulted in a lot of angry shouting, but the man pushing his way through responded with a quick glance back, his kumadori showing on his face. Most of the voices went silent immediately.

The man looked quite pleased with himself as he moved to steal food that

was made for someone else. But then...

“Everyone has to wait. Get in line.”

There was one person there who wasn't going to be intimidated by this man.

It wasn't Kai, of course. Kai had only just joined the line and was barely affected.

A youth with a dauntless smile moved his face close to the large guardian bearer as if to intimidate him. And then he hit him with a backhand strike!

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The name of the big man who'd cut in line was Gand Yohna.

He was lord of Gand Village close to the western edge of the borderlands, and on his face there was a tres sigil.

The youth who'd hit him with a backhand strike was Pablus Myula. He was the second son of the household that ruled over the fortified town of Pablus, which was part of the Holy Northern Crown. His kumadori was already showing, and likewise, his sigil level was tres.

Kai didn't know these names, of course. As if some force had bound them together, these three would come to know each other's names and the ties of fate between them would strengthen.

No ordinary person would get involved in a battle between two guardian bearers. The wit and wisdom of the other attendants made them quickly surrender their places in line when they saw the first signs of a fight starting. They all moved to nearby hiding places. Fortunately, the castle interior was strongly built. There were places where people could hide.

The unfortunate people were the kitchen staff who could neither run nor hide. They couldn't just waste the ingredients they were using to make food at that moment. Their pride as cooks kept them fixed to their positions.

As for Kai, he'd grown far too accustomed to this sort of chaos, so he simply stood there and watched calmly yet vicariously while the two tried to injure each other. When hard and soft objects came flying at him, he would move his

body slightly to dodge or hit them out of the air with his hand. When a piece of white bread with a short shelf life—something that would never be seen in Lag—landed at his feet, he quickly crouched and scooped it up before casually beginning to eat it.

It's too easy to get mad on an empty stomach.

The big man must have been quite hungry himself because after taking a few hits he ran into the kitchen, grabbed up a round, flat piece of fried food he found lying there, and threw it into his mouth.

That actually looks pretty good.

“That’s my master’s crab quiche!”

“Who cares? I’ve eaten it now.”

To provoke further anger, he grabbed up another piece of fried food and made a show of chewing and savoring it.

The big man and the youth were both tres sigils, but it was clearly the youth who had the advantage. Though the big man was more heavily built and his arms looked much thicker.

Although their sigils were on the same level, the physical strength they had as individual members of the same species was not the same. Kai knew this all too well from his experience fighting against the armored soldier. Sigil level behaved like a multiplier, and the power that a guardian bearer could output was determined by multiplying their sigil level by their base strength.

But it still looks like the little guy is winning.

Kai was actually smaller than the youth, but he still thought of him as little.

The bread that he’d held in his hand was soon gone. With a calmness that seemed out of keeping with the chaotic scene before him, he went looking to secure himself more food.

The youth’s advantage was in his refined martial arts. Neither of them were armed because they were inside the provincial castle. When the two fought hand-to-hand, it was martial art skill, or lack thereof, that determined who would win.

The youth's body moved like water finding a path between rocks as he got closer to the big man who was greedily and spitefully eating the quiche. Before anyone knew it, the youth had grabbed the big man at the chest. The youth had kept his body low as he continued charging forward and rammed into the lower body of the big man.

Kai watched as the big man was lifted up and spun through the air with his waist as the center point. The move caused the term "seoi-nage" to enter his mind. But in this world where martial artists tended to have strength beyond the level of an ordinary human, martial arts were more about using brute force than careful refinement.

The big man had easily flown more than 10 yules after the maneuver. He was thrown out into the corridor and hit hard against a stone wall after rolling along the floor.

As for the youth who'd thrown him, he straightened up and took a moment to catch his breath before casually throwing a slice of the quiche into his mouth. He was acting a lot more well-mannered, but he was just as hungry as everyone else. And his hunger had been just as detrimental to his mood.

The big man was coughing and glaring angrily as the youth walked out of the kitchen toward him. Kai seized the opportunity to enter the kitchen as the youth was walking out. He asked the cooks to give him whatever food they had ready while he finished off what was left of the quiche the other two had been eating.

It's kinda like a sweet fried egg with filling. I like it.

Out in the hall, the big man was getting back up, ready to resume the chaos.

Kai was biting into white bread and guzzling down creamy wheat gruel that had just been prepared. One of the women who worked there in the castle noticed just how calm Kai was and asked him, "Would you be able to do something about those two?"

She'd already sent out word to the guards, but the troublemakers were guardian bearers, which meant that stopping them wasn't going to be easy. She feared the fight could go on for some time.

“You are a noble yourself, I assume.”

“Hah...? I’m no noble.”

“Oh, right. Just you looked kind of...”

“I’m from Lag. I’m here to carry the luggage.”

“...”

The short conversation ended with disappointment spreading through the kitchen as they realized Kai was no more than a clueless commoner from a small village. The woman started to treat him with less respect now, and when Kai tried to reach out for another basket of bread, she snatched it away from him.

When Kai looked at the woman in confusion, she pointed upwards, signaling the upper floor.

“In that case, go fetch your master.”

“But he’s sleeping,” Kai replied.

“Wake him up then.”

“Come on, kid,” another cook chimed in. “We can’t do our job with this going on.”

“Do us this favor, and we’ll make whatever you ask for.”

“...”

Now that Kai had some clear motivation, he was raring to go all of a sudden.

“I stop them, and you make me food?”

“We’re not saying you should stop them yourself.”

“I’ll put an end to this.”

“No, wait...”

“Oh dear. There he goes...”

Kai left the stunned cooks behind and walked out into the corridor where a bloody brawl was still going on.

Kai thought that he'd find the youth winning a one-sided fight, but instead he saw both of them had suffered some heavy damage and had blood covering their faces. This was a fight between two guardian bearers where the bleeding wounds recovered rapidly, but the big man's arm was hanging limp, looking painfully dislocated, while the youth was breathing hard as if out of stamina.

"That's enough, both of you."

While the two fighters glared at each other, Kai forced his way between them. But that just made both of them think that their opponent would be distracted, and it triggered another round of attacks.

The big man used Kai as cover while throwing punches with his right arm, and the youth also treated Kai as a shield while keeping his body low and approaching from behind Kai. But the youth figured that little Kai could be seriously hurt if he was hit by a punch from the big man, so he moved to stand by Kai's side and then tried to thrust him aside with an elbow in one smooth movement.

But despite the youth's concern, Kai didn't budge.

As the big man lunged forward, Kai dodged with a slight movement of his head, as if he was just stretching his neck, and then he knocked him off course with a headbutt.

"Ouch..."

Kai had been a little too eager to show off with the headbutt, and it left him groaning and rubbing his head. The big man was stunned to see that a lunge with all of his might behind it had been easily knocked aside with a headbutt. He staggered and collapsed with his arms around Kai's shoulders.

The youth still had his elbow pressing against Kai's immovable body, and the big man was hanging over Kai's shoulders defenselessly. Kai took the opportunity to put them both in headlocks.

As Kai forcefully brought their two heads together, he told them, "Stop or you'll have me to deal with."

"..."

“...”

Both of them had been showing their kumadori while the sigiless fighter had intervened.

It was a strange thing to see, but it was enough to bring an end to the matter.

Kai strode into the kitchen as if nothing was amiss and stood at the front of the line. The youth and big man joined behind him, and then scattered attendants nervously lined up behind them so that they could carry out the orders their masters had given them.

In a sense, the new line they formed showed how strength was all-important across the entirety of the borderlands.

Some already prepared food was then put on a tray and offered to Kai, who took it back to his room with a broad smile on his face. The eyes of everyone around were on him as he walked away, but no one spoke a word.

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Despite feeling some sort of pre-banquet excitement, Kai managed to fall asleep during his first night in the provincial capital. He must have been exhausted because it felt as though morning arrived in an instant. When Kai came crawling out of the closet, he happened upon Olha, who scolded him for oversleeping by shouting, “How long do you intend to sleep?!”

The baron and Lady White were also out of bed already, and there were several unfamiliar women in the room who were taking good care of House Moloch by cleaning and doing various chores.

When he asked, he was told that these were castle maids and they had been sent to take care of Lady White in preparation for the announcement of her engagement the next day.

Kai made a brief effort to look presentable, but he was still a shabby-looking kid from a small village in the middle of nowhere, and he wasn’t about to start obsessing over his looks now. When one of the maids caught hold of him she looked rather worried and strongly urged him to leave the room right away.

As he was leaving, he took one look back in the direction of Lady White's room and saw her hair being combed and scented oil being applied to her skin as the maids all worked on her appearance. Kai was a little surprised to see her being waited on like a true lady.

They must have noticed Kai looking because one of the maids moved to block Kai's line of sight. He realized it wasn't very proper of him to stare at a lady who wasn't fully dressed. He wandered out into the corridor.

"Lord Shellgala offers his congratulations."

"Could all visitors come this way please."

Out in the corridor, there was a procession of callers hoping to offer gifts and words of congratulations.

The baron and Lord Olha, along with several maids, were busy dealing with these guests.

Although it was merely an engagement, it had been decided that Lady White would be wed to a descendent of the warden of the borderlands, so there was no shortage of people who wished to make her acquaintance. This was another consequence of House Moloch arriving last minute before the banquet. There weren't many days to spare, so all of their visitors appeared at once.

"Lord Nahal offers his congratulations."

"All guests, this way please."

"There's little space within our room, so I must beg your forgiveness."

Although many of the callers were guardian bearer nobles, the maids were able to make them line up without letting their smiles falter. Their skills must have been developed while serving the house that held authority over the lords of the borderlands. As a spectator with nothing better to do, Kai was able to appreciate the excellence of these women all the more.

As gifts were offered one after another and formed a large pile, they started to encroach on Kai's room. It felt only natural that Kai should be the one to keep the pile of gifts well-ordered, so he'd finally found a job to do.

"Please, step this way."

“I have to ask that your attendants also stand in single file.”

Many of the visitors were powerful lords with strong ties to the count himself, and their gifts were textiles and craftwork fine enough to please the women living in the center. They didn't look as though they were incredibly expensive, but it still looked as though they were trying to flaunt their wealth in front of a minor house like House Moloch, and it left a sour taste.

On the other hand, lords from neighboring villages not so far from Lag presented well-made, thick, practical-looking woolen goods and beautiful, auspicious azure gems that girls in the borderlands were much more likely to appreciate as gifts. Those lords weren't the sort to curry favor through flattery, so they sought out the members of House Moloch among the hustle and bustle of the room and spoke with them just briefly before leaving. The only ones who stayed a long time were the visitors from House Bofoy, which was the house that Lady White's mother had originally been born to. Lord Kuwainaze of that house looked at Lady White's shy figure with narrowed eyes and then had much to say to Lord Vezin as her uncle before he then left.

By the time all the hustle and bustle had calmed down, it was close to noon. That was when the final and most important of all the guests arrived. They were sent by the mother of the count's sixth son Ashna. She had dispatched a large group, possibly owing to her strong interest in House Moloch.

She likely wanted to show the difference in power between her and the bride-to-be because she had sent far more callers and servants than anyone else.

A great number of servants handed over numerous engagement gifts, one after the other, and they soon formed a pile out in the corridor.

“To mark your engagement, the mother of the groom, Count Balta's fourth wife Flameya, and her family bring you gifts and extend their congratulations.”

They took a long time checking items against a list and then the room became completely full because many of the items weren't things that could just be left in the corridor.

In the end, the guests had to be received in the corridor, but the aging man who'd visited as a messenger didn't seem concerned as the baron received him awkwardly.

The man gave his name as Hahan. He appeared to be a powerful lord closely connected to the count, and he had already made the baron's acquaintance before.

They both sat down silently as soon as the maids had quietly set up some tables and chairs. It was cold out in the corridor, but there were many people clustered around, creating an atmosphere similar to a camp on a battlefield.

This engagement had been decided with the blessing of the count himself, and people close to the sixth son had been unduly enthusiastic. The sixth son was quite removed from the battles to be the count's heir. This led the count himself to suggest the engagement. The number of gifts that the count's wife and her people had sent may have been linked to their excessive expectations. A bundle of letters similar to congratulatory telegrams were handed to the baron.

With great rhetorical flourish, Lord Hahan lavished House Moloch with what praise he could give to such a minor house of the borderlands, and he spoke passionately of the engagement and how good a match it was. Even Kai, who felt it had nothing to do with him, felt embarrassed by such praise, and it was no surprise to see the baron awkwardly put his fingers to his chin. They also heard Lady White's laughter leak out from inside the room. House Moloch had held misgivings about the difference in the status of the two families, so the other side's enthusiastic stance was perhaps a little over-eager, but it allowed them to breathe easier.

They exchanged a few more words and then Lord Hahan wiped away the sweat he'd built up during his passionate speech and turned to leave. However, it was at that moment that Lord Hahan heard a voice from behind that caused his pale gray eyes to widen in a rather theatrical manner.

"What a long-winded speech that was."

Lord Hahan turned to look back toward the voice that had suddenly joined them.

A young man was walking along the corridor prodding at the numerous gifts that lay there. He was dressed in a noble's attire like that worn in the center.

He wasn't particularly tall, but the way people backed against the wall of the

corridor when he drew near made it clear that this young man possessed considerable power.

The man wore scarlet robes tied with a broad sash, and he took the chair vacated by Lord Hahan without so much as giving his name. He then urged the baron to take a seat.

“Lord Adol.”

The baron had spoken the name of the count’s oldest son, Adol.

Lord Hahan approached, looking as though he had something to say about Lord Adol’s interruption, but someone quickly blocked his path. Lord Adol was the count’s heir, and he would never have entered this place without being accompanied by his attendants.

The attendant who stopped Lord Hahan looked familiar to Kai.

That’s the stuck-up guy from the kitchen fight.

It was the youth who’d beaten up the big idiot trying to cut in line at the kitchen. The youth soon noticed Kai was looking at him, and he looked back with some surprise.

While the two were watching each other closely without speaking, Lord Adol and the baron had begun a conversation. It started off with a few words of congratulations and then House Moloch was forced to accept some gifts held by another of Lord Adol’s attendants. A rather forced attempt at small talk followed and then the real reason for Lord Adol’s visit became clear.

“Let us change the subject, Lord Moloch.”

“My Lord?”

“My apologies if this offends you but... I’ll be frank. Do you think you could pretend this engagement never happened and then go back to your own domain?”

Kai blinked with surprise.

Everyone else was no doubt exchanging shocked glances with the same dumbfounded expression.

Lord Adol had begun to propose something unthinkable. Not only did it leave the members of House Moloch speechless, but also Lord Hahan and his people.

“Naturally, I’ll be the one who smooths out matters here. If a house from the east becomes tied to my house through marriage, that would be a troublesome relationship with no benefit to either of us, wouldn’t it? If you were thinking that this engagement would make us more likely to send soldiers to your aid in times of crisis, then your expectations are too high. Any reinforcements we might have provided have been drawn away by the center, and my house does not have any additional power to spare.”

“Lord Adol!”

“You are done here, Lord Hahan. Leave us. My business is with Lord Moloch.”

“I will not leave.”

“Then you may listen. But do not interrupt.”

“But My Lord!”

Lord Hahan tried to reach out and grab Lord Adol but was pinned against the wall by the youth. When Lord Hahan became angry and revealed his kumadori, the same tres sigil as before appeared on the face of the youth.

Lord Adol showed no concern for the difficulty his attendant was facing as he continued talking to the baron.

“My father intends to use the marriage between our houses to inspire a great change across the borderlands. As in times of old, he wishes to bear the burden of managing the borderlands while putting a greater distance between himself and the center... But such selfishness from a warden of the borderlands who holds great influence over the north will do no more than anger our king. This has caused great concern for a number of individuals of high standing.”

The baron had nothing to say.

He simply remained silent and listened.

“The borderlands may be poor, but we are at least stable. The borderlands owes its existence to the support of monarchs, who through generations have given support to the barren land of the borderlands to the north. Therefore, we

ought to repay this favor. It is only natural that we return the favor by providing what grain we can spare while the central plains are in the midst of a serious famine, and simple respect for our forefathers is reason enough to dispatch soldiers to aid the south during times of turmoil. To argue otherwise would be outrageous. Incidentally, my father has reconsidered our ties to those in the center worthy of great gratitude, and is now selfishly trying to consolidate his power in the borderlands. I cannot help but condemn his heartless nature. If my father uses the marriage between our two households as a symbol of a borderlands uprising, then it is my duty as eldest son to correct the follies of my father. I must put a stop to this before we incur the wrath of the king, and before the warden of the borderlands loses his standing in the center. This is why you must walk away from this engagement. I will prepare another lady whose engagement to Ashna can be announced while the banquet is being held.”

“But...”

“A particular lady from a noble household in the center. I have already begun making arrangements, and they appear enthusiastic. To be honest, the head of the house is already here in the province with the lady in question. The king himself has already given his congratulations, so that particular engagement can no longer be canceled.”

Lord Adol spoke the last few words in a whisper and then took a look in Lady White’s direction. He seemed curious about her.

“But Count Balta never spoke of...”

“Indeed, he did not. My father is still intent on seeing a marriage between our households nonetheless. I imagine he kept his silence lest the Iron Taurus might storm off home in a sulk. Although he will not coddle you like a child, I hear that my father has prepared a souvenir of considerable worth for the sake of appeasing your household. This is a confidential matter known only to my father’s close associates and people like myself whose pets whisper them secrets.”

“My Lord...”

“I do not mean to shock you, but you must be aware that this talk of

engagement may very rapidly become talk of a formal marriage ceremony. That is another matter that my father has not discussed with many people. My father will do whatever he must to ensure that the lady of House Moloch does not escape his grasp.”

“ ...”

“Might I ask you to take your leave right now, and you can leave the difficult matters to be handled by myself?” Adol whispered as if luring in his prey.

Lord Hahan had been mesmerized by Lord Adol’s revelations, but now he angrily cautioned the baron.

“You must not believe everything he says!”

“Lord Hahan, I will do the talking here.”

“Lord Adol has wed two ladies from the center. His head is filled with the sweet words they whisper to him. He is controlled by...”

“Lord Hahan.”

A stern reprimand caused Lord Hahan to hold his tongue. Lord Adol was still sitting, but his kumadori had appeared and the sigil of his god was now visible on his face.

At a glance his sigil was a quart, or perhaps even a cinqueta. This was a divine spirit inherited by the eldest son of the family, and it was clear that this was one of the most powerful divine spirits possessed by the count’s house.

Lord Adol made sure that Lord Hahan was silent and then turned to face the baron. He frowned to pressure the baron for a response.

“I cannot withdraw under my own volition,” the baron said, choosing his words carefully.

“You may come to regret it later.”

“Even so.”

“Very well, Lord Moloch.”

With that response, even Lord Adol seemed to stop holding his breath and relax.

Then Lord Adol's gaze shifted from the baron and looked into the room behind him, toward Lady White who was still being groomed. Lady White was shocked, as if she hadn't expected any attention on herself, and the maid combing her hair from behind placed a hand on her shoulder as support.

"Then allow me to suggest an alternative arrangement."

"My Lord?"

"If your aim is to tie our households through marriage, then I have no objections to taking your daughter as my wife."

It was hard to tell whether this sudden proposal was genuine or in jest. As the baron was about to stand up, Lord Adol brought his own face close to the baron's and whispered something unthinkable.

"And there is one more thing I'd like to inform you of."

"My Lord..."

"Your daughter's life is in danger," Lord Adol said with a cold smile.

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Lord Adol's final parting gift for House Moloch had left a sour aftertaste.

They waited for Lord Adol to be out of sight and then Lord Hahan did his best to smooth things over, but his words rang hollow even to Kai as he listened from a distance. It was unlikely that the baron was reassured by anything he said.

As expected, the baron said he wanted to talk with his family and asked everyone else to leave for a time. Lord Hahan couldn't hide the anguished look on his face as he left.

"So... the rumors were true then?" the baron said.

"I had assumed it was all nonsense," Lord Olha replied.

In a room filled with gifts, the members of House Moloch sat in a circle and talked.

The maids must have guessed how the baron felt after being put in this

difficult position because they soon left the room without being asked. They were clearly well trained.

It was, of course, the baron who started the discussion, and the first thing they discussed were rumors Lord Olha had heard from another lord while they were drinking together.

They had been similar rumors, but the two of them had thought it impossible, and neither had taken it seriously.

“To think that another engagement could be arranged in secret to ruin that of my house,” the baron said.

“I remember hearing that people from the count’s house were excited about the arrival of guests from the capital.”

“It’s too late for our house to do anything, so we must put our trust in Count Balta.”

“But this other engagement cannot have been formally accepted just yet. If Lord Adol spoke true, then perhaps we must take action ourselves, before things go beyond our control.”

“You’re right. We cannot allow this to damage House Moloch.”

Lady White listened with what little color there was draining from her pale face.

While the count’s intention may have been to distance himself from the turmoil in the center and strengthen his protection of the borderlands that he considered his own, the nobles from the center had been able to throw an obstacle into his path.

Another lady had forced her way between their precious engagement while looking down on Lady White as someone of low birth. The turn of events threatened to damage the trust that House Moloch and other houses of the borderlands placed in the count. It was a simple but effective method.

Kai felt rage burning inside himself.

“Could we even refuse the engagement ourselves at this point?” Lord Olha asked.

“We cannot. Our house already owes a great debt after the support we received regarding the inspector. Even if we are suddenly told that a formal marriage will take place, we must accept it. As unfair as it is, we must accept... but...”

The baron looked at Lady White. “Jose,” he called to her.

He looked at her face, which was devoid of all energy, and simply told her, “You must endure this.” Then he stood up and began to groom himself.

“You will be his second wife,” the baron said before leaving the room.

Lord Olha tried to leave after him, but was stopped when the baron commanded him, “Protect Jose.” It would indeed be careless for the two guardian bearers to abandon Lady White at a time when her life might be in danger. Needless to say, Kai the greenhorn was not expected to be much help in a fight.

Then the baron left to visit the count, who no doubt was aware of the situation.

The maids must have realized that the family discussion was over because they re-entered the room and went back to tidying the room and grooming Lady White.

With nothing else to do, Kai stood by the only entrance to the room as a guard. He wasn’t about to let the smallest bug enter the room if it looked the slightest bit suspicious.

Lord Olha must also have had nothing to do because he soon stood by Kai’s side. He must have thought Kai was a bother because he then ordered him, “Go fetch a tub of hot water.”

There was an empty tub leaning against a wall, which must have been used by the maids to wash something. Kai picked it up and headed to the familiar kitchens on the ground floor.

He figured he’d ask the kitchen staff to fill the tub with hot water and give him a cleaning cloth, and he might be able to fill his stomach with some fresh white bread while he was waiting. But his scheming was interrupted when he heard a voice.

“I’ve finally found you.”

Kai turned and saw the big man from before.

Gand Yohna.

A young lord from the village of Gand at the western edge of the borderlands.

“We’re going to settle this out back.”

“I’m busy.”

“You and me... wait.”

Kai picked up the tub full of water and a cloth given to him by the kitchen staff, and then he turned and walked away without even acknowledging Gand Yohna’s tight grip on his shoulder. The fact that he could even do this was evidence of the incredible power hidden within Kai’s small body, and the big man almost tripped as he hurried after him.

To anyone watching, it would have looked like the balance of strength was inverted. “Hey!” Yohna shouted while chasing Kai through the corridor. But then both Kai and Yohna found their path blocked by several men who looked at them with toothy grins.

It was actually just Yohna who they were interested in.

“You, the one from Gand.”

“How about a rematch? You and me.”

“No, he’s mine first.”

They looked like three clumps of muscle, and in their over-eagerness, they were all showing kumadori on their faces. These three were all guardian bearers.

The big man chasing Kai, Gand Yohna, looked at the three of them before snorting loudly and telling them, “Later, later.” His attitude was like someone trying to brush off a bunch of pestering children, and the three men weren’t standing for it.

“You can’t win once then run!”

“Ignore him! The three of us can drag him out back.”

“I’m gonna smash his smug face in!”

The three guardian bearers came charging in at full speed, so a tres like Yohna had nowhere to run. Meanwhile Kai was standing in front of Yohna like a salad leaf trapped between two walls of meat.

If Kai just had to protect himself, he would have been able to dodge somehow. But he was holding a tub of water that was as big as himself, filled to the brim with hot water. The cloth was also wrapped around one of his hands, and there was no way he could quickly move out of the way in this situation. He was quick enough to put down the tub and slide it aside with his foot. But he was crushed between bulging muscles a moment later, and the hard feeling of the bodies combined with their awful body odor made him feel ill.

“Move!”

Even in these cramped conditions, Kai could still use his strength. He bent his left arm and forced his elbow out in front of him before twisting his body and driving the fist of the other arm deep into Yohna’s gut behind him.

“Guh.”

An arm stretched over Kai’s head as Yohna tried to hold back the three men charging at him, but all he managed to do was cough up stomach fluids as he bent double.

Kai then forcefully cleared the space around him and made it his own by delivering an upward headbutt to the chin of another man who’d gotten too close. The difference in height meant that Kai grazed the bottom of his chin, sending the man falling backwards with his brain rattled.

Kai’s eyes caught sight of a moving object coming closer. His exceptional ability to track movement was like another blessing given to him by the god of the valley.

In Kai’s world, everything moved slow, while he alone continued to move swiftly. He calmly positioned himself ready to strike.

He’d quickly realized that the way his head had grazed his opponent’s chin

was likely to have caused a concussion. Even guardian bearers had a brain in their skull used to govern their body movements, and interrupting the operation of this central command center would make anyone, no matter how tough, fall down for at least a moment. He remembered a past life where those studying hand-to-hand combat would practice multiple techniques based on this principle, but it was unlikely that many people in this world understood that same principle well enough to use it in developing combat techniques.

At that moment, Kai's past-life knowledge fused with his own understanding, and he realized that concussion was a fundamental victory condition in any fight. He took the lesson to heart, and the knowledge became part of himself.

This is nice...

If he'd thought to use such a technique against the armored soldier, he might have been able to stand against him in a non-combat scenario. Kai was idly considering the possibilities in his mind, despite being in the midst of a battle.

But the knowledge of another inside himself forced him to acknowledge that a concussion was unlikely to be such a weak point for anyone who trained their neck muscles well enough.

Although the approach had worked for the big man in front of him, Kai understood that such reasoning would only apply to the narrow category of enemies known as humans. Against demi-humans known for their high physical performance, and against exceptionally tough enemies like the armored soldier, it was unlikely to be so easily effective.

A young boy had knocked Yohna onto his behind with a single blow and had then knocked another man unconscious with a single headbutt. There were sounds of admiration from everyone watching.

"Kill each other for all I care. Just leave me out of it."

With that, Kai went to pick the tub up once again. However...

Yohna stubbornly got in his way. He staggered over while still holding his stomach with one hand, his eyebrow raised and twitching with irritation.

"Not bad. My guts felt that."

“Out of my way.”

“Which village are you from?”

“...”

“You’re not a noble, are you?”

As always, Kai hadn’t allowed his kumadori to show on his face.

“So you really are just a greenhorn?” Yohna muttered with a frown, which soon turned into a broad smile.

Then, while still looking at Kai with curiosity, Yohna kicked over the tub at his feet, sending the hot water spilling across the floor.

“There you go. Now you’ve got time. You and me, out back.”

“I can fetch more.”

“And I can pour it out again.”

“...”

Two remaining members of the group of three were watching this argument between Kai and Yohna in astonishment. Now they guessed why Yohna was so fixated on the young boy. “Is he the one they’re all talking about?” one of them whispered.

Someone else who just happened to be passing by quietly replied: “He’s that monster of a luggage carrier.” Yesterday’s brawl in the kitchen was already the topic of rumors spreading throughout the third residence.

No one had known whether to believe the rumors, but for young guardian bearers who were itching to test the strength of their god, they were rumors that held a lot of appeal. Everyone had been thinking about that luggage carrier and hoping that they might bump into him at some point.

It wasn’t just Yohna.

Kai felt a strange sort of heat fill the corridor and decided that now would be a good time to abandon the orders he’d been given by Olha. Fighting would be easy, but he hadn’t the slightest intention of revealing the god of the valley’s power, so that was out of the question.

Kai quickly took a look in each direction and tried to estimate how many enemies he was facing.

Eight... maybe nine people...

If all of them were guardian bearers, and if all of them came at him at once, not even the god of the valley's power would stop him from being overwhelmed, and they might even kill him.

After reaching the provincial castle, Kai had mostly been shut up in his room, so he didn't fully understand the layout of the third residence. He went where his intuition guided him and headed in a direction that took him away from the entrance he'd passed through when entering this building for the first time.

Kai sprinted down the corridor, skillfully dodging the hotheaded guardian bearers looking for a fight to his left and right. Then Kai saw that a gathering of unusual individuals was walking in his direction.

It was a gathering of priests.

They were led by a man wearing a black priest's robe partially covered by a marigold colored cloth that he wore draped over one shoulder. Another 10 or so men walked behind him.

His hood covered the area around his mouth as his eyes, like narrow slits, watched Kai run by. For a moment, his eyes widened just slightly.

At first, Kai was surprised to learn that there were priests in the city, but then he remembered that traveling priests would regularly visit out-of-the-way villages in the borderlands such as Lag, so it was no surprise that they should be found in a city as grand as the provincial capital.

The winter solstice banquet was a major festival held by Count Balta himself, so various traditional rituals were likely to be carried out, and that would naturally involve priests.

Kai correctly guessed that this corridor was leading him outside.

Once outside, he'd left his pursuers behind, meaning that now was the time to unleash his true power and disappear by heading off in another direction. Or at least, it should have been.

He had not expected the rear door to lead out onto a vast courtyard where ritual contests were taking place.

He was moving so fast that he ran right into the middle of the wide open area before realizing his mistake. He cursed his useless intuition while looking for another way out, but the shouts from the men chasing him from behind informed him that it was too late to turn back.

“Me! I’ll take him on! Gand Yohna, the lord of Gand Village!”

There were now more eyes on him than he could have imagined, and his guardian bearer pursuers belatedly arriving from behind had blocked his retreat.

Everyone saw a small boy who was little more than a child, and behind him was a big man who was certain he had him cornered.

“That’s him!” someone yelled. “The luggage carrier!”

Excitement spread across the courtyard.

“That boy...”

The gon-no-sōzu had turned to go back the way he came.

He had already concluded that the ritual contests were of no interest to him.

But now in his haste to return there he almost tripped as he broke into a run, and he barely heard his followers when they asked him what was the matter. The site of the ritual contests came into view.

Along the slope that lay between the second residence and the rear of the third residence was one of the broad stone steps that formed a paved area resembling a courtyard. It was here that many of the guests, guardian bearer lords from across the borderlands, had gathered.

In the center of the courtyard, he saw a small figure standing motionless, and for some reason it triggered a wave of emotion within him.

The other priests had come following after the gon-no-sōzu had run off. Several of them warned him that they had other business to attend to and there was nothing more to see here other than a bunch of warriors from the

borderlands who cared for nothing besides comparing their strength. The gon-no-sōzu had found the scene more tedious than anyone else, but now he'd suddenly had a change of heart, and the lower priests could not help but criticize him.

For some reason, the gon-no-sōzu would not take his eyes off the young boy.

There was a soft sound of the bell on the khakkhara staff he held in his hand.

Formidable...

The gon-no-sōzu's eyes could see the column of blue aura rising from the boy's body.

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Only now that he'd come this far did Kai realize his own carelessness.

Everyone knows about me?!

Somehow, it wasn't just the big man in front of him, the walking clumps of muscle had formed a line, and everyone else around was at Kai and shouting, "It's the luggage carrier!"

Kai remembered what he'd done to cause all this attention to be focused on him. All he'd wanted was to get an easy meal for himself, and that had meant getting involved in the kitchen brawl the night before.

Naturally, he'd never revealed his name, and he hadn't expected anyone to remember his face after that brief encounter. But Kai had been overwhelmed by the atmosphere in the provincial capital when he'd first arrived. He'd naively thought that everyone else here was just as busy as he was, and it was only now he realized his foolishness.

Even the glorious provincial capital was just another city inhabited by the people of the borderlands, and here, like everywhere else, people admired those with exceptional combat abilities because that was what kept them protected from outside enemies. Kai had realized this all too late.

To make matters worse, he'd realized someone else was there.

I'm being watched...

He could feel that someone nearby was using spiritual energy.

Most of those in the crowd watching were probably guardian bearers. They'd fight until they grew tired, then they'd join the spectators. There were dozens of them, and all of them loved to fight.

The big man preparing for battle along with the line of contenders behind him were all of course guardian bearers. With so many strong people gathered together, it would be no surprise if the crowd contained at least one person who knew magic—what Lady White had described as the arts.

He closed his eyes for a moment and then he opened them again.

Before him he saw the world colored by auras.

Him...

He knew now who was watching him. Beyond the lined-up clumps of muscle, near the rear entrance to the third residence, there was the group of priests who Kai had passed by a short while ago. In the center of the group stood a high priest holding a khakkhara staff.

The word that immediately came to Kai's mind was truthseeker.

They were searching for a new land god, a deity so powerful that the great monastery expected it could bear the weight of the human kingdom's framework, and they had dispatched high priests. In a way, it was only natural that they should look here in the largest settlement of the borderlands. But this was the time of the winter solstice banquet. It was also likely that the count had invited them here to hold some sort of service.

The single narrow eye that was visible beneath the high priest's hood was watching Kai intently. The aura rising from his body was scarlet like the evening sun. His eyes were narrow like threads, but there was a light within them, making it clear that he was using some sort of art.

The world that the priest saw was the same world that Kai was seeing.

It meant that the priest could certainly see the blue aura that was overflowing from Kai's body.

I must really stand out compared to everyone else.

There were dozens of guardian bearers around, so it was easy for Kai to objectively compare himself to the others. Although every guardian bearer carried a strong aura, the skin exposed from their clothing glowed with just a faint light, and the overall amount of light they gave off was less. This may have been because their power was being spent to increase their physical strength.

The supply of spiritual energy increased with an increasing level of divinity, causing those hiding great power within to shine brighter. One benefit was that it meant an opponent could be judged without needing to see their kumadori.

It also meant that magic users, those proficient in the arts, were also possible to identify. It wasn't possible to hold in all the surplus spiritual energy needed to operate magic, so their body would be a glowing source of light, like a living lantern.

I must look the same...

Thanks to the god of the valley, Kai had ample spiritual energy supplies, so he always had enough to spare for magic. When he'd had to stop the fight between two guardian bearers in the kitchen the previous evening, it had been useful because it allowed him to increase his strength for an instant.

This was the secret behind Kai's ability to overpower everyone while appearing sigiless. Even with the action of his blessings suppressed, he could recirculate the surplus spiritual energy through his body to gain inhuman strength. It was an incredibly powerful technique once he got used to it. His constant efforts to hide his true nature had caused him to go to the trouble of reallocating his surplus spiritual energy without even realizing he was doing it.

This reallocation was something he did unconsciously, and it would switch off when it wasn't necessary.

When he wasn't moving, he would naturally have leftover spiritual energy, and Kai would start to shine brightly in the world of auras.

I need to get out of here...

Last time the god of the valley's power had been revealed to another human, it had caused truthseeker Nada to try to kill him. Kai had no way to be sure that

these priests wouldn't try to do the same thing.

He didn't know the rules of these ritual contests. He got the impression that a contest wouldn't start until two fighters had announced their names, but no one was keeping scores. It felt like a place where people could just fight however they wanted.

He decided there was no need to worry about rules.

Kai quickly examined his surroundings. The big man, Gand Yohna, realized that Kai was planning to run away, so he lunged at him with his kumadori showing.

Kai controlled the surplus spiritual energy recirculating within himself more consciously than ever before. The fear of those watching stopped Kai from being reckless.

My legs...

He consciously controlled the movement of the spiritual energy, just as he did when using magic.

The blessings of his god that overflowed from his godstone were like a mysterious fuel supplied for the purpose of carrying out the host's wishes. If Kai wished for something, it could soon be made reality.

Kai focused his attention on moving quickly while concentrating his spiritual energy in his legs. Then he tried to flee the arena. His surplus spiritual energy was the only thing increasing Kai's strength, and he couldn't wield as much overall power as the tres sigil, Gand Yohna, who stood before him. But biasing his spiritual energy towards the body parts used in hand-to-hand combat allowed him to get better results.

At that point, Kai was far superior in terms of power in his legs. However, that power was easily spent just by jumping, so he couldn't shake off anyone who grabbed him.

Just as Kai had no feet on the ground and no way to use his powers, Gand Yohna caught his ankle at the last possible moment and then slammed him down against the paved ground. The moment Kai was struck by a sense of falling, he directed all of his spiritual energy towards his back and his head

before they could hit the ground.

Ugah!

He didn't feel any pain, but it did knock all the air from his lungs.

His body then seemed to float as it bounced into the air. An instant later he hit the ground again. This time it actually hurt. A crushing feeling filled his chest as though his lungs were being squeezed tight.

His body bounced back up into the air a total of three times. As he coughed, splatters of his blood were scattered across the area around him.

It was a messy business, but when two guardian bearers fought, their ability to withstand such punishment was central to the fight.

He looked up at the cloudy winter sky filled with falling snow and for a moment or two, he couldn't remember what he was doing. But then he saw the big man looking down at him triumphantly, and his body began to burn with rage.

What insolence! the god of the valley cursed.

Kai's god began to rage while insisting that Kai unleash his full power to crush this enemy.

The pain of having his lungs crushed soon became a sensation of heat. He could feel the organs in his chest being repaired with incredible quickness. He would have to endure the feeling of suffocation until his breathing had recovered.

He wondered if now would be a good time to lose by pretending to pass out.

The plan was forming in his mind but he was quickly forced to abandon it. Gand Yohna came charging at Kai without mercy even while Kai lay motionless.

"You're gonna fight!"

As the big man spoke, the bottom of his large shoe was approaching.

This stomping attack was intended to cause further damage to Kai's organs. But Kai had already rolled out of the way.

Gand Yohna's stomp hit the ground and cracked the stone paving.

Is he trying to kill me?!

To buy some time while his lungs recovered, he needed some form of assistance. The god of the valley had sensed their opponent's malice and was snarling ferociously.

Kill him! Kill him now!

God of Mine, Kai responded, killing him is hardly a good idea.

Kai somehow managed to climb to his feet while rolling, but Gand Yohna was still charging at him.

He needed some way to defend against a big man rushing at him like a wild hog. He couldn't use all of his power while the priests were watching him with suspicion.

To keep himself out of the priest's sight, Kai moved to a slightly different position where he was hidden behind the body of the big man. As soon as he was out of sight, he set his healing magic to work on his lungs.

As Kai's breathing recovered his thoughts were racing.

What to do in a situation like this?

Should he try to run or should he try to win?

But what would become of him after winning?

The baron's testing me... I know that's the real reason he brought me here.

In that case, there would be no problem with winning a few small victories. He could make a show of losing afterward.

This wild hog was pissing him off, and Kai wanted to give him a beating. After that, he'd find a good opportunity to pretend to be defeated. His plan was decided.

The priest was only seeing Kai's aura, so he would only be a little suspicious.

Kai had made his decision.

Kai sent his fist flying straight forward.

I can't let myself be seen...

Kai tried to keep out of the suspicious priest's line of sight as much as possible by using the big man's body as cover. Kai's spiritual energy would naturally overflow from his body, and much more spilled from him than any of the young lords here. Just looking around him, he could determine this objectively.

Then Kai realized why.

Because they use it differently...

Ordinarily, the guardian bearer would gain blessings from a land god in some form or other at some point in their life, at which point they would instantly gain guardian bearer powers, giving them strength far beyond a regular human. In ordinary circumstances, the land god's blessings prioritized protecting the host from threats against their life, so it would be focused on strengthening their body. However, someone like Kai could use spiritual energy for magic, and he treated the power supply from his godstone as a limited resource to be used efficiently. He felt the need to manage his supply.

He would unconsciously suppress its consumption, causing a reservoir of surplus energy to collect inside his body.

For an ordinary guardian bearer, their spiritual energy flowed like a river with a fixed water level, while Kai, as a user of the arts, had built a dam that stored energy for secondary purposes.

Spiritual energy overflowed from him to such excess because much of the spiritual energy that would have been used to reinforce his body had unconsciously pooled.

Maybe I should just let it flow...

Kai took a deep breath and then relaxed while licking his lips.

He abandoned his desire to use magic and set his body's power free. He felt the heat that came from his godstone spreading to every part of his body.

Then he tried comparing himself to those around him again.

All right. Not so different now.

With his power as a guardian bearer released and his kumadori still hidden, Kai's total output of spiritual energy was reduced to a normal amount. In fact, it was even a little less than that of the big man in front of him. He looked closer to make sure and then breathed a sigh of relief, but that short break in his concentration was not overlooked by the battle-crazy big man.

He buried his clenched fist into Kai's stomach, causing a jolt of intense pain that reached up to the top of Kai's head. They were as different in size as an adult and a child, so the punch was easily enough to lift Kai off his feet.

His innards were screaming at him. He was in trouble.

You fool!

His god's criticism was ringing within his ears as he closed his eyes tightly with the pain. There probably wasn't a land god anywhere who didn't hate to lose. The god of the valley's irritation reached him and his body stiffened.

Give me a break, My God.

At that moment he had to protect the secret of the valley.

Kai curled up ready to take whatever attack followed, but the big man mercilessly came flying at him from above.

This bastard's actually trying to kill me!

He'd intended to pretend to lose, but that wasn't an option when his opponent's attacks might cost him his life. Kai made sure that his lower body was hidden from the priest's line of sight and gathered his spiritual energy in his toes.

He used his quick vision to follow a kick delivered by the big man.

He raised both arms into the air and then gently grabbed the leg while dodging the kick. The big man's leg, which was thick as a log, slipped under Kai's arm so that it was held at his armpit. Kai then used his heel to kick the leg that was supporting the big man.

As he did so, he felt eyes were on him.

He was positioned where the priest couldn't see, but he felt there was someone else watching him. However, he'd already begun the kick, and it was too late to stop it now.

His heel connected with the knee of the big man's leg, hitting from the side. There was an unpleasant sensation and then the big man went tumbling backwards.

Now he was in plain sight and the group of priests standing by the rear entrance of the third residence could see him once again. They were watching him just as closely as before, but it still felt as though there were powerful eyes on him from some other place.

It's not just this high and mighty priest...

There were several dozen guardian bearers who'd decided to watch the fight. It was only natural that there should be one or two among them who could see things most people couldn't.

At any rate, he had to solve this problem while being watched. The big man had fallen down, but he'd be on his feet and ready to fight again before long. The other guardian bearers looked ready to charge at him in the same way. It reminded him of how the baron would train the soldiers.

Lords of the borderlands and their descendants had grown up in the borderlands knowing that the future held many more battles with powerful demi-humans. They each developed a strange fixation with being strong enough to defeat any opponent they might face. There was a sort of madness visible in the eyes of every guardian bearer watching, as Kai could break their every limb and they'd continue to bite at him in a frenzy.

He'd need to knock his opponents unconscious.

Kai remembered his method of causing concussion, but he knew that it would be difficult to make the big man's head rattle while he was lying on his back on the ground. Instead, he decided to deliver a decisive blow. He tightened his fist.

The body's vital points were mostly collected down the center. The jaw, the solar plexus, and the crotch included. This was one of the first things taught when learning martial arts.

The first thing that caught his eye was his opponent's exposed and defenseless solar plexus. As he went to slam his fist down on the location, Kai remembered the diabo that he had fought with in the royal palace of the macaques.

Just touching the diabo briefly had caused him to fall unconscious. It could drain away something like experience points from within an opponent's godstone, and the shock would cause the god upon the perch to fall unconscious.

He quickly determined the location of the big man's godstone.

Then he gathered power within his hand. He wasn't just trying to strengthen the impact, so the spiritual energy didn't overflow from his fist to a great extent.

With his fist punching down, the moment he struck the surface, he released a damaging shock wave directly toward the land god within the godstone.

The impact itself must not have looked like much. In fact, as Kai got off the big man and moved some distance away, he saw him try to get up... but then he began to vomit.

I guess I can't do it as well as a diabo can.

For just a moment he gathered his power and glimpsed into the world of auras where he saw that the faint red light coating the big man's body had lost some of its brightness around his chest.

The interruption of the spiritual energy meant that this region was no longer protected by his god. It was just an exposed piece of human meat.

As the big man was suffering with both hands flat on the ground, Kai clearly saw another region on his back where the light was also fainter. While the gap was rapidly closing up, he mercilessly delivered several strikes right into that region. That was the finisher.

The big man named Gand Yohna completely collapsed, and all of the impatiently watching guardian bearers drew closer out of curiosity. From among the crowd they cheered and announced themselves as new challengers.

Something else caught Kai's eye.

The hooded high priest was running towards him after breaking away from the group of priests.

At the same time, he finally realized which direction the other powerful gaze that he felt was coming from, and he tried to determine who it belonged to.

A bird...?

He looked over the courtyard and then up to the toweringly high roof of the third residence.

On the edge of the roof far above, some creature was sitting and watching him. In an instant, it then hid itself from view.

"Nowhere... to run..."

With crazed guardian bearers surrounding him from all sides, Kai simultaneously gave up on escaping and resigned himself to fighting. The dangerous individuals that surrounded him included the high priest.

Let's go. Come at me.

After this, he'd make sure not to reveal his skills. He'd decided.

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Kai was engulfed in a storm of melee combat, leaving him nowhere to run.

He no longer had time to complain. His ability to use spiritual energy at specific locations had been too obvious. He had openly used the ability to the extent that he no longer thought that he could hide it from the priest. His enemies came at him as if genuinely trying to kill him. If he carelessly allowed himself to be hit, it would be more than he could handle gracefully, and his body could very easily be damaged.

As the battle got going, Kai felt himself becoming just as aggressive as those around him. He set himself loose and focused on fighting as well as he could without letting his kumadori show.

I'm done playing. Everyone here's getting a beating!

With a complacent look on his face, he beat back the approaching clumps of muscle while carefully moving from place to place to avoid getting trapped between two walls of meat. In this situation, his well-practiced circle footwork of Zula-ryu was genuinely useful. If he'd tried to run away in a straight line, he would have soon been driven into a corner of the courtyard, where he'd have been trapped like a rat in a bag.

The ability to trace circles with his feet as he moved around the broad space of the courtyard, while always being sure of his position, proved crucial.

But of course, it wasn't possible to dodge every one of the attacks that came at him from every angle, and a few good hits had left him with a swollen face. No matter how many times they hit him or were hit themselves, these walking clumps of muscle never stopped smiling. They were mad, each and every one of them. Even the priest had wandered into the brawl, as if nothing was amiss, and he'd made his way to a nearby place where he could watch more closely. His eyes were on Kai constantly, and his presence was an annoyance. Kai tried provoking a tall man who was aggressive and covered in blood from head to toe, in an attempt to lure him into aiming an attack at the watching priest.

Kai beautifully stepped aside as the tall man lunged at him, and then rammed into the tall man's back with all of his might, sending him hurtling towards the priest. It was a dirty trick that left him wide open to a flurry of punches from another fighter, but he didn't care anymore. The narrow eye of the priest visible inside the hood went wide for just a moment as he saw the tall man charging toward him, but then he managed to dodge it at the last moment. He'd almost been too late to deal with it because he was so focused on his magic. It was unfortunate that he'd managed to dodge.

But Kai didn't intend to give up so easily. In the corner of his eye, as another man tried to grab him, Kai caught him by the head and then leaped onto his shoulders. Now that Kai had himself a launchpad, he fired himself forward. By kicking the man with all of his strength, he turned himself into a projectile.

The priest was still distracted, so by the time he saw Kai coming, it was already too late. The top of Kai's head smacked into the priest's nose causing it to break. Kai felt an unpleasant crushing sensation as the priest fell backward and broke Kai's fall.

As blood was spurting from the priest's nose, Kai mercilessly supported himself with his elbow, causing his weight to suddenly force down onto the priest's stomach. Similarly to Kai, the priest had been focused on using his spiritual energy and the component that should have been spreading through his body had been collected up to give him power. It meant that the defense provided by his skin was barely greater than that of a regular person.

That's what you get.

Kai had just done something that would have been unthinkable under ordinary circumstances, and the feeling of immorality inside him turned to joy. He was a guardian bearer after all, and he wasn't so different from the other knuckleheaded men of the borderlands.

The priest's accomplices ran towards him in shock, so Kai formed another scheme to take care of them all at once. Some distance away, he spotted a man who'd conveniently fallen down. Kai headed over to grab him by an arm that was stretched across the ground. He was about to take another few hits from the approaching swarm, but he managed to keep the damage to a minimum by dodging with small movements as he threaded his way through the turmoil, eventually reaching the arm.

The rest of you aren't getting away!

As his body moved, he just barely kept his footing while rotating on one leg. He lifted up the fallen man and spun him around, knocking back the walking clumps of muscle as he threw the body. The man screamed as he was sent spinning through the air, and then he beautifully collided with the legs of the priests who were running toward the high priest.

Kai laughed from his stomach while watching the confused and fallen priests. But a moment later he found himself placed in a headlock by a big man with a mustache, who then lifted him into the air. Kai's carotid artery was completely closed off, causing him to finally fall into black unconsciousness.

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He didn't know how long he was unconscious.

But he was still surrounded by guardian bearers, so he didn't think it had been

very long.

Kai woke up and found that he was in the ritual contest courtyard just as before. Apparently, several people had been knocked unconscious in the brawl and many of them were still lying by Kai's side. Many of them were snoring loudly, as though they hadn't actually been knocked unconscious, but had just gotten tired out and fallen asleep.

The moment Kai lifted his head he felt someone take their hand away from him. It was as though someone had been checking him for signs of life.

With half-open eyes, he studied his surroundings and soon noticed that the hooded priest was crouching beside him. He suspected that he'd been examined while unconscious, and it made him tremble with rage.

This priest belonged to the same organization as the priest known as Nada, who had once hunted Kai down. There was every reason to suspect that he might be carrying one of the instruments specially designed to kill guardian bearers or that he might have some means of discovering the true level of divinity of the land god hidden within Kai's godstone.

Kai felt sure that he'd successfully passed himself off as sigiless so far. If his act had been successful, then the only reason for them to pay him so much attention was the way he had channeled his spiritual energy when they first saw him.

To test this, Kai began consciously managing the spiritual energy flowing out of his godstone. For a moment, the surplus amount of spiritual energy shone brightly, drawing a reaction from the priest.

"Blue... Just as I thought. The sacred color."

His reaction was similar to Porek's. The priest remained sitting and grabbed Kai by the arm when Kai tried to back away. Kai instinctively gathered spiritual energy in his arm, but the priest had some technique that caused the energy to disperse. When Kai realized that the priest had a way of rendering his magic inert, he became somewhat panicked. Now that the priest wasn't distracted, he turned out to be a master of the monastery's martial arts. Kai thrashed his arms and legs wildly, but the priest was able to suppress his every movement.

“Calm down. You act like I’m trying to eat you.”

“Gon-no-sōzu! He must be held down.”

The priests were crowding around him and were probably not impressed by the way Kai had knocked them over a short while ago. The priests who shouted appeared to be one of the higher-ranking priests. Gon-no-sōzu must have been the rank of the high priest.

“My fellow priests will do only as I bid them. First, you must be calm.”

“...”

Kai had once come close to being killed by a priest, so he was naturally suspicious. But to the people of the borderlands, it was considered common sense to display reverence and respect towards priests. Kai tried to calm himself so that he could pretend to act the same way.

“I am a humble priest by the name of Seluga. Might I ask your name?”

“Kai...”

He’d only come here to attend the solstice banquet, and he wanted to be seen as an ordinary lord or a member of a lord’s household. Officially, an everyday lord held higher authority than a priest, so the priest treated Kai with respect.

He asked where Kai was from, and when he realized that Kai was no more than a subject from the village of Lag, one of the priests around him suddenly became less polite, but the priest known as Seluga continued to treat Kai with the utmost respect. This was despite the fact that Kai had wounded him the most heavily.

He learned that Kai was a greenhorn who had eaten many godstones of demi-humans on the battlefield. Kai thought that plain old intellectual curiosity was what drove the priest to learn more about Kai’s past, but it turned out that it wasn’t that simple.

“I see you are able to use the arts. How did you come to learn such things?”

“...?”

“It is too late to play dumb. I saw it with my own eyes.”

“...”

Damn. It was too late to hide the fact that he knew magic.

In that case he would have to decide how much to reveal. Fire magic was easy, but they hadn't seen him use it yet. Kai hoped that revealing his fire magic would be enough to satisfy the priest.

Considering how another priest had once tried to kill him after learning about the god of the valley, there was no way he could mention anything about his god. Now that the priest knew he was a greenhorn from a village, it seemed to be better to tell him more about that than to try hiding it. It was a good plan.

Without mentioning anything about the god of the valley, he told the story of how he earned the title of greenhorn, thus reinforcing the priest's existing impression of Kai.

“When I was running away from a battle one time, I saw an org use fire. Then I tried it and realized I could do it myself.”

Kai was a cowardly foot soldier who had been lucky enough to scavenge godstones from enemy corpses while fleeing from a battle, thus making him the greenhorn he was now. At the same time, he'd witnessed an org that knew the arts and could use fire magic. After returning home alive, he found he could do the same thing himself without understanding how he did it. He'd hidden this from the other people of the village and had practiced the arts by himself in secret. This was the story he told the priest.

When the priest asked him for every little detail, Kai pretended to be a simpleminded villager. He considered his act to be flawless.

However...

As always, Kai was rather clueless for a guardian bearer.

“It seems you are unaware of the fact that your blessings have imbued you with sacred color.”

He tried to remember what Porek had said was special about spiritual energy appearing in the sacred color. He seemed to remember Porek saying that this color had some special meaning.

“Spiritual energy can have many different qualities to it. A well can be dug on any land to produce water. But there are differences in the water itself. Most of the time, one finds cloudy water that is not fit for drinking.”

“ ... ”

“The qualities of spiritual energy are apparent in its color. Occasionally, one might discover a spring that produces holy water like sweet nectar. This peculiar and highly nourishing water carries a sacred blue glow.”

Kai realized why the priest had taken such an interest in him.

There were people who could see his secret.

“Such springs that produce water with the holy color are host to great gods of the highest order.”

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The sacred color.

That was one aspect of spiritual energy released from the body of a guardian bearer, which itself was host to a god. It was the color of the aura that determined the divinity of the god they held, and the blueness was of particular importance.

“The spiritual energy emitted from your body shines brighter as more is given out. But the color of the aura produced depends on your level of divinity.”

It was not uncommon for priests to give sermons intended to enlighten the uneducated people of the borderlands. The gon-no-sōzu was similar to others of his kind as he continued in his attempts to educate Kai.

“Those with the lowest level of divinity appear brown. At a slightly higher level, they become red, which then transitions to yellow, and then to the holy color of white. Beyond that is the sacred color, which we know to be the greatest among all aura colors, and it is a rare thing to behold.”

“ ... ”

“Perhaps you would allow me to examine your kumadori,” the gon-no-sōzu

said.

Kai had insisted that he was sigiless, but now he realized that even the truthseeker, who was not a guardian bearer himself, had been able to produce a doi sigil when fighting with Lord Olha.

In the brawl with the guardian bearer a few moments ago, Kai had clearly been able to fight the others on even terms, so it was already clear to everyone that he had reached a level where he should be able to display a kumadori. It wasn't just the gon-no-sōzu, the other priests were also staring at Kai expectantly.

Needless to say, when Kai was surrounded by high-ranking priests, every guardian bearer there wanted to know what was happening.

"A kumadori?" Kai was still reluctant to cooperate. "I haven't got one."

He stood up and took a step back. He still hoped he might escape before everyone there could hold him down.

"You take us for fools! The very suggestion is absurd. Trying to hide..."

"If I do have one, I've never noticed it."

"Enough nonsense. You've revealed your spiritual power already."

"I've told you I don't know anything about kumadori. I'm leaving."

The gon-no-sōzu looked at the other priests and then they moved to surround Kai. Kai was done talking. It was time to focus on escaping. He knew that running away would do nothing to solve the root of the problem, but he felt that it would be better to run like a coward before they could learn anything more about him.

If it came to it, he could hide somewhere in the provincial capital until the day came that the baron headed home.

This priest with his lofty title of gon-no-sōzu didn't seem to be so proficient in his martial arts that Kai couldn't handle him. Kai had been able to land a hit on him once already, albeit through a surprise attack.

When the gon-no-sōzu saw that Kai was ready for a fight, he sighed and assumed a combat stance himself. But the priests around him were less keen.

After they'd all exchanged opinions, they appeared to lose interest altogether.

Kai's ears were good enough for him to catch a little of the conversation. He heard them say, "we waste our time on a mere tres sigil" and "forget not our true objective," as well as some other things he didn't understand.

The argument that got the gon-no-sōzu's attention was, "We are about to be late." His air of priestly calmness vanished as if he'd been reminded of some important appointment. Another priest picked up the khakkhara staff and checked if their belongings were in order. They were ignoring Kai as if he wasn't worthy of their time.

Kai remembered that these priests had originally been headed someplace else when he passed them in the corridor of the third residence.

"Sadly, we have no more time to spare on you. We shall speak again some other time."

The gon-no-sōzu stood up straight and then gave Kai a slight bow.

When Kai quipped that they must have decided they weren't ready to go to the underworld just yet, the gon-no-sōzu's expression relaxed as if he found this amusing.

"Please do not look at me so angrily. We are both learned in the same arts, and an exchange of knowledge would be beneficial to us both. But now I must take my leave. I fear I may be late to an appointment with a count."

The gon-no-sōzu turned to leave.

Kai relaxed a little as he watched the group of priests walk away and disappear from the courtyard where casual bouts were held. With the strange group gone, the guardian bearers around Kai began pointing at him and whispering to one another.

"Those have got to be the truthseekers visiting the city."

"You mean the count has priests here investigating the prophecy?"

"Hah? They're just traveling priests. They'll do the services for the banquet."

"But they were watching our fight the whole time. How'd you not notice?"

Some of them looked suspiciously at the entrance that the priests had disappeared into. It was clear that other villages had been visited by truthseekers in much the same way as Lag.

These were the priests they were supposed to revere, and yet no one thought highly of them, as if everyone had shared the same sense of unease when these priests visited their domains wanting to know every last detail about everything.

Their concerns about the odd priests led them to wonder why they'd been so interested in Kai. When Kai realized that everyone was looking at him, he decided it was time he left.

Kai walked off in a manner that he thought looked incredibly casual, but everyone could see just how stiffly he was moving. Then there was a shout of "Hey!" from behind him.

It was a sound like someone calling out to a friend, and Kai couldn't help but react.

He turned and saw Gand Yohna.

Yohna must have been around 20 years old. The big man was waving to him and running over. Kai thought that maybe he was waving to someone else, so he looked behind himself to check.

"I'm talking to you, idiot. Who'd you think I was waving at?"

"What do you want?"

"Nothing, just... You're going back to the kitchen, right? I'm hungry."

"Why would I... Oh, I was fetching water."

He suddenly remembered the task he'd been given by Lord Olha and quickened his pace.

Yohna walked alongside him uninvited while boasting about uninteresting things like his punches that were supposedly so powerful that no one in his village could endure them. Kai didn't want to hear it, but Yohna talked so loud that Kai didn't really have a choice.

Yohna's description made the village of Gand sound pretty much the same as

Lag, and Kai really didn't care. Then Yohna began to talk about the external threat that Gand was facing from a demi-human species with strange colored fur. Suddenly, Kai was a lot more interested.

At the western edge of the borderlands, Gand Village was under constant threat from demi-humans known as bragantos. They were bigger than orgs, their horns could smash through boulders, and they could stampede over human armies, tearing them apart like a field of grass.

Kai was gradually becoming more knowledgeable about the world of demi-humans. He did of course have some knowledge about bragantos already.

So bragantos are causing trouble in the west...

He was a little excited to hear that Yohna's account matched with his own limited knowledge.

Near the northern limit, where orgs reigned supreme, the bragantos were a species powerful enough to hold back the orgish advance to the west. Yohna realized that he had Kai's interest and happily told of all the troubles of dealing with the bragantos. He spoke passionately, while making wild hand gestures, about a fight in which he'd risked losing an arm to break off a braganto's horn and had very nearly been killed.

Yohna's carefree attitude had put Kai at ease. He told his own story of how 1,000 macaques had attacked his village and how he had leaped from place to place, single-handedly keeping the entire length of a defensive wall from being breached. Yohna's eyes lit up like those of a child when he heard Kai's story. He clapped his hands shouting, "Wow, wow, wow." It turned out that rumors about the battle at Lag had already spread as far as Gand.

Kai fetched another tub of hot water from the kitchen while Yohna collected as much bread as he could carry, and then it was time for the two to part ways. But for no reason, the big man continued to follow behind Kai. "We've got an unmarried lady with our group, so you'd best stay away," Kai warned him.

"Well, that's hardly putting me off," Yohna replied. He wouldn't stop laughing while following Kai. He promised he wouldn't enter the room, so Kai gave up and let him follow all the way back.

When they arrived in front of the room belonging to House Moloch, they found a large crowd of people had gathered there for some reason.

They weren't all guests. Some of them were servants who worked third residence, and the count's maids who'd been taking care of Lady White were also there. They were all speaking to one another in whispers.

"How could such a thing happen under Count Balta's very nose...?"

"Such dreadful business."

"If anything were to happen to the lady, I dread to think what would become of us."

Kai must have been gone for an entire toki just to fetch a tub of hot water. He hurried over feeling that something terrible had happened in the meantime.

As Kai forced his way through the crowd of aghast onlookers, someone noticed him and called out to him. Lady White was slumped over by her bedside, and Lord Olha was standing there with a sword in his hand as if standing guard over her. Lord Olha scowled as he called out to his useless servant.

"Kai! Where've you been?!"

Kai couldn't help but make himself look small while holding the tub of hot water, and Lord Olha shook his head tiredly as if he barely remembered the errand that he'd given Kai. Kai knew that it wasn't normal for fetching a tub of hot water to take a whole toki.

He looked around for the man responsible for him being late and spotted Yohna blending into the crowd and trying to look innocent. For once, he'd actually realized he was causing trouble.

Lord Olha looked so angry that if they'd been back at the village, he might have sent Kai to the punishment room there and then. But he had no time to deal with his clueless and bumbling servant at that moment. He gestured toward the bed with his eyes, and ordered that the thing lying under the bed, which looked like a cursed item, be disposed of.

What is this thing?

Even someone as clueless as Kai was able to more or less grasp the situation when he saw what was there under the bed. The reddish black corpse of some creature appeared to have been removed from a box and discarded on the bedroom floor. It looked like it might have once been someone's pet. It was the body of a creature not often seen in the borderlands.

There was a letter lying by the body, and when he carefully spread it out with his hand, he found several lines of familiar-looking text were written there in blood.

Although Kai lacked the education needed to be able to read it, he'd seen some of these words on the gravestones of land gods here and there, and he felt that they didn't have pleasant meanings.

"Can you read it?" he asked while holding it out to Lord Olha, but he was just told to get rid of it, and so he stuffed it into the box that the corpse had been taken from.

Sending such a thing to a lady who was celebrating her engagement could only be the work of evil people.

At that moment, a word whispered by one of the maids caught Kai's attention.

Jinx.

As shocking as it was, a large part of the crowd didn't seem all that surprised, suggesting that such things weren't so unusual when there were big shots from the center around. Once he'd sealed the body inside the box, Kai noticed a thin thread of spiritual energy extending from the jinx.

One thread extended out towards Lady White and he noticed another extending like a fishing line that led back to wherever the box had been carried in from.

The curse of the jinx appeared to have already been placed on Lady White. Kai felt sure this was a form of magic.

"Hurry! Get it out of here!"

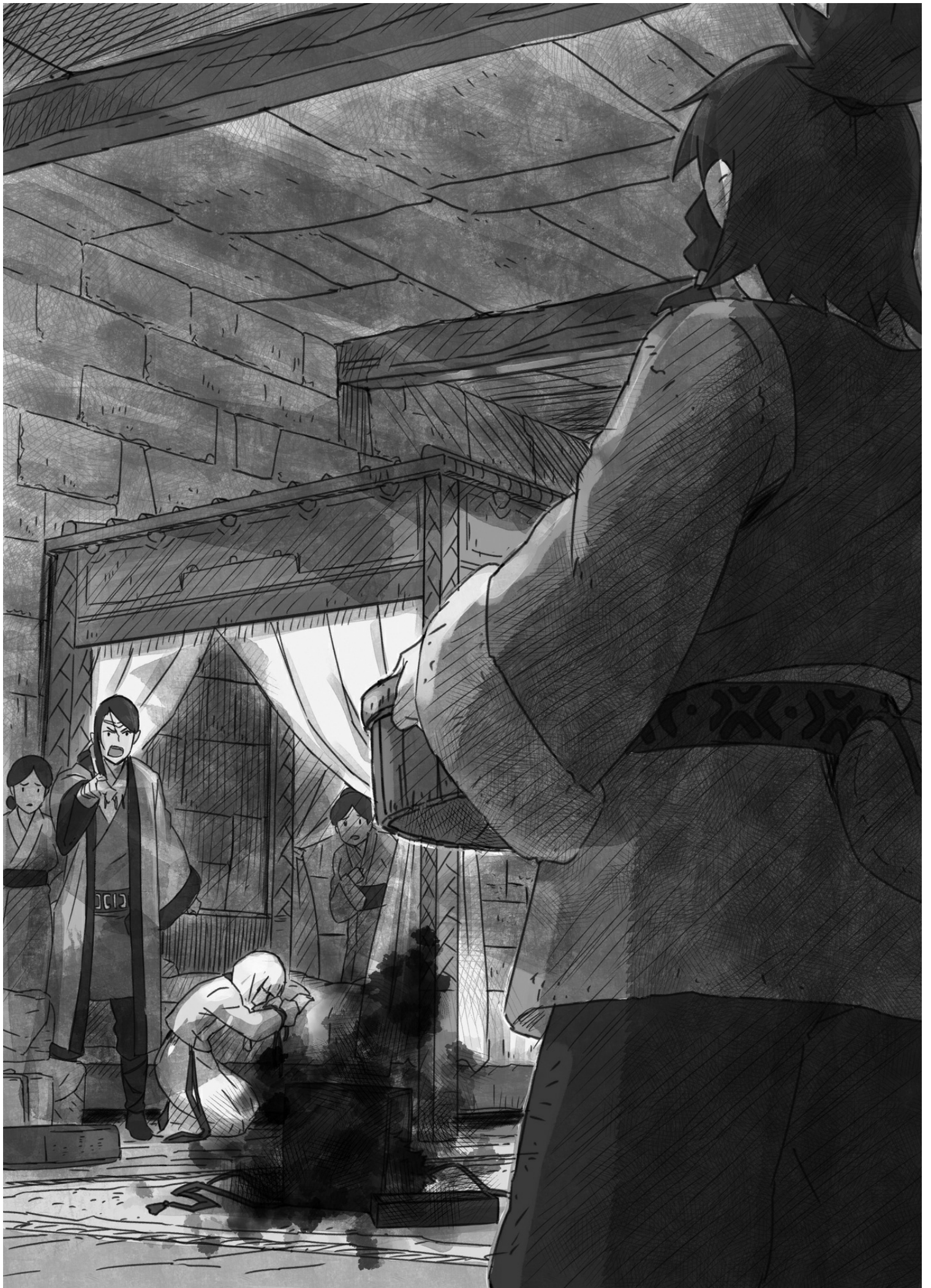
The magic making Lady White suffer at that very moment was being delivered

to her body through this thread of spiritual energy. Kai considered cutting the thread apart, but then he reconsidered and decided it would be better to determine the source of this evil. He didn't understand why someone would happily do something so evil while leaving obvious evidence behind, but whenever he found who did, he was going to hurt them so badly that they'd never be able to do bad things like this ever again.

He was worried about Lady White and wanted to do something for her, but Lord Olha wasn't going to let him get any closer while he was holding the jinx.

"Just get going and get rid of the thing!"

Kai did as he was told and left the room.



While listening to reports quietly whispered into his ear by one close associate, Adol was looking in the direction of a different close associate.

These close associates were mostly servants kept by his mother, Amalisha and her family. Accordingly, they were highly skilled. Adol could remain in his quarters like this and they would tell him of the various happenings across the vastness of the provincial capital without needing any particular orders from him. It was Count Sneel's belief that if his daughter was Count Balta's first wife, then the son of that daughter was the rightful successor to the title of warden of the borderlands. He provided great wealth to both the mother and her child. Adol's mother, Amalisha, was said to be the richest person in Count Balta's household by far.

At times like this, I just don't know what my father is thinking.

There was no end in sight for the worsening turmoil in the center, and the situation was close to becoming a calamity. Although the borderlands were comparatively better off, the power of their house was gradually slipping away, and it might be easier to hold on to what was left if they put some distance between themselves and the center. There was nothing unusual about that way of thinking.

In the center of the glorious country of humans, near the throne where the king god sat, land rot was spreading resulting in a serious famine. The royal estate had obtained devotion from 1,000 land gods of humanity, and their decline could never have been foreseen. The south was being conquered by demi-humans, causing an unprecedented famine in the center. This led to intense pressure being placed on the barren lands of the borderlands to the north, a region that had been of no interest to anyone up until that point. The borderlands were seen as holding the key to humanity's fate, and the warden of the borderlands who ruled over that province had the powerful lords of the center fighting among themselves as they sought to strengthen their ties to him.

There was indeed a limit to how long they could continue to aid the center.

The borderlands had always been plain and barren, and they did not have enough spare forces to take care of every citizen in the Unified Kingdom. The soldiers of the borderlands were praised for their fearlessness in battle, and now they were in high demand, but there weren't enough of them to satisfy that demand.

If the count was to gather together all the people of the 200 lower lords that served him, their subjects would not amount to even 100,000. The number of men had fallen as a result of the continued fighting. If every soldier in the borderlands was gathered up, there would probably not even be enough of them to form a single legion of 10,000 men. Half of their own personal army had already been allowed to dissolve as a result of their relationship with the center, and the strength of Count Balta's household itself, which was supposed to be the center of the borderlands' power, was fading. His father would not allow himself to be drawn closer to the center, and had even rejected an offer of a promotion to the role of minister, which would have made him the most powerful count in history. This had immediately done serious damage to his reputation.

Father will start with this marriage, and then he'll form ties to important houses that move him further from the center. He is putting his pieces in place in preparation for whatever it is he plans to do afterward... This much I can understand.

No matter how much his importance might increase, the borderlands would never be more than borderlands. Even if the population increased ten-fold, it would still not compare to that of the center. By refusing to acknowledge the glory of the king, it would create an excuse for an army to be sent in to subjugate them, and the glory of the name Balta would be easily crushed underfoot. In the end, it would be no better than allowing repeated requests in the king's name to drain away their grain and soldiers.

Father alone is able to enter the royal palace and be granted an audience with our king. If there was something that could only be learned there, then I can surmise no further.

In the depths of his father's workspace, a consultation with Lord Moloch had been going on for a long time. When dealing with lords of insignificant villages,

his father's silver tongue could usually talk them into anything in no time at all. However, Lord Moloch was arguing fiercely because his daughter's life was in the balance, and he would not be talked down so easily.

Ironically, those who were responsible for putting Lord Moloch's daughter's life in danger were sitting in front of Adol at that moment.

Sitting across the table were a young woman cloaked in sheer sarah silk, which could only be obtained from the town of Suuk near the capital, and her father, who possessed the level of wealth needed to allow such luxury.

Count Valma Colsarouge. He was a fattened noble with prominent cheekbones who, much like Adol, was surrounded by close associates whispering secrets in his ears. But those secrets appeared to hold little interest for him, because he angrily drove those people away.

His unhealthy-looking eyes fixed on Adol once more when he realized Adol was looking at him.

"Now perhaps I might hear your reply."

"You must forgive me," Adol replied with a wry smile.

As long as he was requiring the support of House Sneel, he could not show disrespect to these guests. From the viewpoint of those in the center, Count Balta had been driven by some whim to squander the valuable engagement to his son on a minor lord of the borderlands. By thwarting this attempt with more fitting marriage talks, they intended to bring Count Balta to his senses.

If it meant that there was an opportunity to tie his house to Count Balta's house, Count Valma was happy to offer up his daughter to foil Count Balta's plans.

But given that his beloved daughter was to be married off, he did have some conditions.

"I will not stand for some unheard-of lord being treated as if he is equal to House Valma. I do not imagine for a moment that Count Balta thinks his behavior sensible. For him to insult my house in such a way..."

"The king has already expressed his congratulations regarding the marriage

between your daughter Lady Florence and my brother Ashna. These proceedings cannot be canceled at this stage. My grandfather, Lord Sneel, has also given his regards. So, please, do not fret..."

"You said as much yesterday! If you cannot make him listen yourself, then we have means of our own."

Unlike her short-tempered father, the daughter sat very quietly as she fidgeted with the long pelt of a fox that was draped around her neck.

"I do not understand the meaning of this prior engagement. But regardless, when a house of House Valma's standing offers a lady to be wed, one would expect others to have enough common decency to step down without needing to be told. I have of course heard that this little lord was responsible for some great accomplishment in the northern lands not so long ago. I understand that as warden of the borderlands, Count Balta feels he has a duty to reward this lord. But it is my house, my daughter, whom the king has ordered be wed to your house. I understand the difficulty of the situation, and it is for that very reason that I have come here myself..."

It was then that the daughter of Count Valma finally spoke.

"I wouldn't mind at all if we just returned home with things as they are."

"Florence, listen here."

"His father might be the warden of the borderlands, but he's his sixth son. You can hardly expect me to be pleased with such a marriage. And I highly doubt this will benefit House Valma."

"Flor—"

"Father, before I choose a noble to be my husband, I'd rather form my own opinion of them using my own eyes and my own ears. What I want is a noble who is willing to take on anyone, no matter how much bigger they might be, and who is so strong that they simply throw caution to the wind."

She'd spoken with such passion that it had made her stand up from her chair and purse her plump lips.

Many of her features were inherited from her mother. She was rather

charming in her own way, and many men found her haughty attitude surprisingly appealing.

Lord Valma clearly doted on his daughter. He stood up from his chair and gave a slight bow before leaving the room. When the two of them were gone, Adol sank into his chair and sighed with exhaustion.

Ashna and his father's fourth wife Lady Flameya should have been responsible for showing hospitality to these two guests. But they were crafty in their own ways, and they must have had some understanding of his father's intentions. When this new marriage proposal was thrust upon them, they'd feigned indifference and said the matter was in the hands of Count Balta, and then they'd disappeared completely. Lady Flameya's original family were no doubt involved in everything.

At any rate, Adol had to solidify his position as his father's successor somehow. The nobles of the center were now openly interfering with plans proceeding in the borderlands, and his father was not afraid to strike back at those who threatened him. As long as Adol had close ties to House Sneel, which was one of the most powerful houses in the center, this falling out between his father and the center could lead to him losing his inheritance entirely.

Damn...

Adol fell into deep thought.

If his father was too stubborn to change his mind, then it would be the evil deeds of House Valma that reduced the white-haired lady to a cold corpse that very night. The world wouldn't stop turning just because a lady of some small village had died, but the confidence that the 200 lords of the borderlands had in Count Balta would be severely damaged in a way that would shake the very foundations of his house.

His father's decision to turn away from the center and focus on the government of his own domain was not a decision Adol could accept, but the loss of the support of the northern lords that gave House Balta its power was equally unpalatable.

He had no choice but to take action before Count Valma.

Even without doing anything heavy-handed, there were still ways to render a marriage proposal invalid. For those willing to use underhanded methods, there were ways to get quick results. A bride-to-be could be kidnapped, or she could become damaged after some other man forced himself upon her. And such methods required no prior planning.

She was a beautiful lady...

Her long hair had shone like silver, her pale features were well-proportioned, and life's fire had been burning in her crimson pupils. The rumors had described her as the most beautiful lady in the borderlands, and Adol himself could not argue otherwise.

The thought of holding this beautiful lady down before her marriage and making her his own ignited some carnal urge within Adol, who had not visited his existing concubines as of late.

There were numerous ways he could take responsibility afterward. She was merely the daughter of a minor baron, and he would no doubt be forgiven for taking her as his concubine if a large enough sum of money was given to her house as compensation.

Obscene thoughts ran through Adol's mind for a short while, and it left him unable to process the new information that was coming to him. Eventually his eyes opened and he called to those near him, "Gather my guards!" He knocked over his chair as he stood up.

"I had intended to stay out of this! This damned count. The provincial capital is House Balta's home, and I will not allow him to do as he pleases here. Forget the guards. Myula, you will suffice!"

"Yes, My Lord."

As Adol walked out of the room, he was followed by a single shadow whose presence could barely be felt.

Adol and the quiet youth known as Myula had been like brothers since infancy. The two were like two sides of the same coin in that wherever one went, the other was always there.

Those who acted on every word of their master and would risk their lives to

defend them were known as shadow guards. The youth was a shadow guard to Lord Adol.

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Jinx.

That was what they called the magic item designed to curse someone.

This was a world where magic actually existed. The desire to curse people naturally led to the creation of dark arts, which must have been refined through continuous trial and error in the world of nobles as a means of satisfying that desire. There was a faint trace of someone's aura on the jinx, and a thread extended away from it like a spiritual trail.

A practitioner of the arts must have been maintaining this connection, and there was also another thread already attached to Lady White, who was clearly their target. A harmful curse must have been traveling through that spiritual connection. Lady White had quickly fallen ill and it was likely that the stain in the aura visible around her body, a foul black color that was mixed in with the pale red, was interfering with the natural cycle of spiritual energy within Lady White's body.

Power was hidden within the jinx, and when the target was surprised by the dead body, it interacted with them in some way, causing a thread to bind to them. This was likely the nature of the curse magic working through the jinx.

At that point, some dark malicious force was continuously flowing into Lady White. Kai wanted to cut the thread, but if he did so, then he wouldn't be able to find the practitioner before they could disappear.

Instead, Kai wrapped the jinx in his own spiritual energy and suppressed it with his own power. This seemed like enough to stop the flow of the malicious effect.

Then he ran.

He had to determine the source before the practitioner stopped using their magic.

Much like the priest's art of one hundred eyes, some kind of art was used to create a trail that maintained the magic, and Kai couldn't deny that he was intrigued. Kai had tried to produce the same effect himself many times, but despite being able to see auras, he couldn't reproduce the art of one hundred eyes. When he moved his spiritual energy outside of his own body, it would dissipate with alarming quickness.

This is long...

The thread of spiritual energy stretched on and on, like a trail of footprints leading to the curse user. He followed it out of the third residence and toward the second residence. Even though it was the day before the banquet, a large group of guardian bearers with no self-control were still gathered to compare their strengths under the guise of ritual contests. Kai kept to the side of the courtyard, and kept his body low so that he wouldn't be noticed. He heard shouting from those who spotted him when he was halfway across the courtyard, but he ignored them completely.

He went from the courtyard to the stone steps and continued on for another 100 yules or so before arriving at the second residence, which was a castle in itself. The practitioner must have been getting close, because it felt as though the thread was growing thicker.

He dodged through passersby and was about to make his way to the upper floor when he felt an unexpected change in the jinx.

The location of the jinx must have somehow been known to the practitioner. Kai himself knew how it felt to use such magic, so he poured more power into the spiritual energy that was enveloping the jinx. He led the energy in the reverse direction along the thread in an attempt to keep the thread whole.

They've cut it...

The practitioner had completely abandoned their curse magic.

Although the thread was broken, there were still remaining traces of the spiritual energy that Kai had tried to send along it.

It finally led him to a room, and he burst inside to find an important-looking noble sitting at a table and drinking tea with a carefully composed face. There

were also men standing at his left and right who must have been his attendants.

The noble-looking man glared at Kai while using his fingers to stroke the end of his curling moustache, which had been hardened with fat or some other substance.

“What business have you here? At least state your name.”

His eyes were clearly focused on the wooden box that Kai was carrying, but he displayed no reaction to it. Instead, he found fault with Kai’s ill manners, as nobles were often known to do.

“Did they not teach proper greetings in whatever small village raised you?”

“Have you no education?”

“Could you not have made yourself more presentable?”

“Did you think it appropriate to enter without an invitation?”

He had assumed that Kai was a servant of some lord from a small village. The noble started to say something about how Kai was bringing shame upon his master, but at that point, Kai was done listening.

Since coming to Baltavia, all he’d seen were guardian bearers who liked to throw their weight around, and it was easy to get the impression that anyone with enough power didn’t have to put up with anything from anyone.

“You’re the one who set that curse,” Kai accused them.

The noble and his attendants then seemed unable to suppress their laughter.

It was an unpleasant sort of laugh that made Kai think they were habitual criminals.

“What’s so funny?”

“How disrespectful of you. What evidence have you for such accusations?”

“I suggest you leave immediately! Else we must call the guards!”

Unsurprisingly, they were denying everything.

It was true that the thread Kai had followed was now gone. Accusations generally wouldn’t stick without some form of evidence. That was one

advantage of delivering a curse via a jinx. It would cause harm to the victim, but the offender didn't need to be at the scene, and so as long as they didn't touch anything themselves, there would be no clues leading back to them.

It meant there was no reason for them to acknowledge their wrongdoings. When Kai realized this, he changed his approach.

There was no need to make these people acknowledge their crime.

Now that Kai had followed the thread, he knew that this noble was the one responsible, and that was all he needed.

They grew angry when Kai didn't respond, and one of the attendants went to call the guards from out in the corridor. But as the attendant tried to walk past, Kai kicked his feet, causing him to fall to the ground.

It must have been enough to break a bone, because the attendant began to cry like a child after falling forwards. His crying was a little too loud, so Kai grabbed him by his clothing and swiftly threw him into a storage room near the entrance, which was quite similar to his own bedroom.

Then, as if remembering something he'd forgotten, Kai took out the mask that was hidden in his pocket.

Although they had already seen his face, there was no need to let them see his kumadori if he needed to get serious.

A suspicious individual, with his face hidden under a mask had very suddenly taken care of one of the attendants. He was refusing to talk, and quickly resorted to violence. The criminals became alarmed as they realized that they were now in a situation that they couldn't simply talk their way out of.

The other attendant shamelessly tried to hide himself under a bed like a frightened cat. Clearly, he planned to save himself while the madman in the mask was fighting his master. Kai put his foot down at the side of the bed, leaving the attendant no way of getting back out, and then kicked the bed across the room while ignoring the screams.

The bed was sent sliding across the floor, and although Kai hadn't actually aimed at the noble ringleader sitting in his chair with a well-composed face, the bed hit him nonetheless, slamming him against the wall. The noble looked like

the type who preferred to fight using magic, so hand-to-hand combat probably wasn't his strong point.

Unsurprisingly, this had all triggered a lot of shouting from outside the room. Kai heard the guards being called, but he somehow felt as though everything would be all right as long as he wore the mask, and he remained strangely calm.

They had tried to curse and kill someone important to him before her wedding. It meant that they deserved no mercy nor a chance to give their excuses.

Kai was tired of carrying the jinx, so he threw it at the attendant who was crawling out from under the remains of the smashed bed covered in blood. The idiot attendant tried to catch it for some reason, but it hit him in the face as intended. The blow to the head from the wooden box caused him to slump to the floor.

Kai walked towards the noble, who was now out of sight. Kai smashed apart any chairs that had been so far undamaged as he walked toward the pile of wreckage that the noble was likely to be buried under.

He realized he was heading for the wrong spot when the noble lunged at him from another location brandishing a dagger. The dagger was no more than a weapon for self-defense. But Kai's intuition told him that a man who'd stooped to using cursed items would surely have coated his dagger in poison.

Kai dodged using his circle footwork and then struck the hand holding the dagger from the side. The noble's face contorted when his dagger fell to the ground, but now that they were close enough to touch each other, the man yelled "Flames, take him!"

The noble outstretched his palm. For just a moment, the fire magic that engulfed Kai's face triggered an instinctive reaction common to all living beings, and he staggered backwards while raising both hands to shield himself.

This... isn't even hot...

The god of the valley must have given him immediate fire resistance because, although he felt slightly burnt, it wasn't enough to stop him from fighting. He soon resumed his fighting stance and leapt at the noble.

Kai's opponent was smart enough to realize that this wasn't a fight he could win. The noble didn't hesitate to flee the room. If he was allowed to escape outside, he'd be free to tell the guards whatever he wanted, and there was a possibility that Kai would be seen as the criminal because he'd invaded their room.

However...

Just as the noble was a step away from escaping, he was mercilessly knocked back by a large fist.

"Bro. Looks like you're having fun in here."

"Gah... Agh!"

Yohna must have followed Kai and lay waiting for his opportunity in the corridor. He smiled happily and charged straight at the noble who was trying to use fire magic again.

He showed no fear as the fire magic grazed his ear. This was another case in which an ordinary magic attack was no use against a guardian bearer. Yohna's quick and simple violence left the noble screaming in fear.

"It's me you need to worry about."

Kai leaped at the noble.

Kai entered the fray by gripping the clothing on the noble's back and throwing him to the floor where Kai could pin him down under his shoe. Once again, the noble used his fire magic, like a hurt child trying to enact petty revenge.

The man's fire magic spell was similar to what the toad had used. They both might have practiced the same school of arts from the center.

Kai could use the same type of fire magic, but his memories from his past life meant that his magic was very different. Fire generally referred to a chemical reaction in which a flammable substance and oxygen formed chemical bonds, but Kai knew that the quality of the flame depended on the type of flammable substance, the amount of oxygen, the temperature, and many other factors.

The phenomenon known as magic, achieved by converting spiritual energy, was not fundamentally the same as the natural phenomenon of fire. In most

cases, it was a phenomenon created using a familiar mental image.

It's me who has the more powerful magic.

They were both users of the same fire magic, but Kai was about to show him who was superior.

Kai felt a childish sense of competitiveness and couldn't help himself.

A white-hot glow was emitted from Kai's outstretched hand. It was a flame like that seen in a crucible used to melt down metal ores. It was a ball of concentrated thermal energy.

The man realized that Kai could also use the arts, and with the determined look of a man who knows that his god will provide resistance, he steeled himself to take the flames. Even in the worst-case scenario, it wouldn't be fatal. He no doubt thought it would be just some momentary pain to endure.

It would take a few moments to be granted resistance, and in that short time, the flames would burn away the downy hair that covered his skin, and it was hard to say what damage the white heat of a crucible might cause his flesh.

With white hot flames covering his palm, Kai struck with his palm heel. Fire palm strike was a fitting name for this new attack. Kai broke through the defense that the man formed by putting up his arms, hitting him in the chest.

In an instant, there was a sizzling sound that was just like oil dripping from fried meat onto hot stones. The feeling against Kai's palm was soft and greasy.

"Nghah. Gyaahh!"

"That's interesting," Kai said to himself.

The man's clothes were instantly burned away in a single location, and Kai's palm quickly sank beneath the man's skin. It was then that the man gained resistance that pushed back against Kai's violent intent.

As he'd expected, the nature of the phenomena produced by fire magic varied considerably depending on the mental image used. Likewise, the rate of spiritual energy consumption had also increased.

The man continued to scream even after Kai withdrew his fire palm strike. It was enough to make Kai lose all enthusiasm, and he no longer kept the man

pinned down with his foot. The man was writhing in agony in the most literal sense. He must have been a lord from the center whose domain was close to the borderlands. The hair and moustache that he'd spent so much time shaping were now ruined as he lay screaming.

Yohna had been watching from close by, and his only reaction was to draw back with a brief, "Uwah." When even a brain-dead brute like Yohna was disgusted, Kai couldn't help but feel guilty.

Guards had gathered near the entrance to the room but they were hesitating to enter. Then there was a cry of "Move!" as someone pushed their way through the crowd. He wore extravagant-looking scarlet clothing and the shrewd look in his eyes was familiar.

Lord Adol.

One of his attendants also appeared behind him. It was Myula, the youth whose mastery of martial arts had caused problems for Yohna.

They both looked at Kai in the mask and then down at the noble crying at Kai's feet. Naturally, Lord Adol was acquainted with the nobles from the center who stayed here in the second residence.

"Lord Sarazaal! Someone call a doctor!"

They called out the noble's name and sent for a doctor.

And then the two formed a wall that would block Kai's escape as the guards positioned themselves to completely close off the corridor. They had arranged themselves to bar any and all attempts at escape.

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Realizing that he'd been labeled as a troublemaker before he could argue, Kai decided to explain his position. If worse came to worst, he could escape via the balcony in the room.

"The lady of House Moloch was cursed."

The mask muffled his voice somewhat, but it still must have clearly reached the ears of everyone present.

Next he pointed at the man known as Lord Sarazaal and asserted, “A curse set by this man.”

It was a very brief assertion that put Kai on the side of justice.

Lord Sarazaal had lain crying in a pitiful state for some time, but now he began to argue back for the sake of assuring his own safety.

“He lies! He assaulted me without warning!”

“I followed the curse to its source. It led me here. No proof? I saw the proof clearly. It was enough. Now I’m passing judgment!”

“Ridiculous! This man is insane! Lord Adol!”

It was exactly what he’d expected, but Kai still tutted with annoyance when Sarazaal shamelessly began to protest his innocence based on the lack of evidence.

Even if he hadn’t brazenly protested his innocence, the evidence of the curse had already disappeared. That had been the cowardly nature of his plan from the start, and it was only a matter of time before Lord Adol and the others declared Kai the criminal.

That was when Kai chose an option that was only available to guardian bearers. If the noble could claim innocence because of the lack of evidence, then Kai too needed to escape before anyone could identify him. He worried a little about the weird man calling him “Bro,” but Kai decided to forget him for now.

The youth must have guessed what Kai was thinking, because he quickly moved around to block the way to the balcony. Kai’s brief attempt at arguing in his own defense had made him lose the opportunity to escape.

But still. He could still smash his way through.

The order from Lord Olha to throw away the wooden box had now been fulfilled by returning it to the original owner.

Wouldn’t the jinx itself count as proof? Kai wondered, but he’d already given up arguing.

The youth was displaying the same tres sigil that Kai had seen before,

presumably in preparation for Kai charging at him. Kai launched himself forward with one leg and threw himself at the youth.

But of course, a simple attack wasn't going to work here. The youth easily dodged Kai's fist and then caught the sleeve of his outstretched arm before pulling Kai's whole body toward him. Kai felt himself being drawn in. The youth's skill in martial arts allowed him to pull Kai in like a human tornado.

How do I counter this?

Kai's arm became bathed in flames.

If everyone had already had the chance to see him using fire magic against Sarazaal already, then they should have been ready for Kai using it again.

But that wasn't the case. The youth panicked when he was suddenly burned by the heat. He quickly released the hand that was pulling Kai in and let his body fall backward to gain distance from the flames.

His clothing looked a little burned. But the fire magic didn't appear to have done any more harm than that.

Good enough.

The way to the balcony was clear.

No matter how quickly he reacted, there was no way that the youth could stop Kai now.

"Myula!" Lord Adol cried.

Adol stood before Kai with his kumadori visible on his face. Kai realized too late that the others had moved to block his path while he was busy with Myula.

Now that Adol felt sure of victory, he readied himself for whatever attack Kai might throw at him. His stance suggested that he would fight with martial arts practiced in the center, rather than the Zula-ryu that was the commonly used school of martial arts in the borderlands. He spread his arms wide to the left and right and daggers suddenly appeared in each hand. He looked ready to kill rather than capture his opponent.

Iron was harder than the skin of a guardian bearer. This principle meant that a guardian bearer wielding an iron weapon could gain an advantage over another

guardian bearer in battle.

And now that he was faced with Adol head-on, Kai realized that the sigil on his face was on the level of *cinquesta*.

A cinquesta sigil?

Adol's god ranked higher than the baron's.

Kai realized that this wasn't an opponent he could take lightly.

Kai allowed his own sigil to appear. Adol must have realized it, but the two had only known each other momentarily, and Kai's glyph sigil was hidden by the mask and by his disheveled hair.

Without fearing the raised iron blade, Kai charged at Adol with his fist clenched. The blade cut a shallow wound in Kai's skin, but he accepted it along with the pain. He fearlessly continued moving forward. He used a Zula-ryu technique known as follow-step, which involved producing a driving force using the muscles of the waist and knees while switching from a slow approach to a fast approach, and launching the body forward.

The diligent training that the dangerous nature of the borderlands demanded from soldiers, and the muscle power possessed by guardian bearers like Kai, had combined to produce incredible forward momentum. When the technique was executed successfully, the user would feel a strange sensation, as if their body was gliding through the air.

Kai's firmly-placed lower body served as a platform that drove his fist forward. Adol must have sensed the destructive power it carried, but he was confident that his own attack would hit first because of the difference in arm length that resulted from their different heights.

Adol's longer arm did indeed hit first. The length of the dagger helped in that respect.

To make doubly sure that his attack would be effective, Adol held his dagger such that his palm pushed against the butt of the handle, and he drove it forward as if it formed a spear together with his arm. His focus was on breaking through the skin.

Kai had clearly seen that attack coming. He made no attempt to avoid the blade as it approached his heart. He continued with his punch, confident that there was no way an attack of that nature could break through his skin.

There was a slight prickling pain. But Kai didn't stop. As he turned his body sideways the dagger cut through his clothes, but he didn't care. He concentrated on making his own attack hit.

Adol carried a cinquasta-ranked god within himself, and he would never have guessed that his opponent was one of the very few guardian bearers in the borderlands more powerful than he was. He didn't realize that his dagger had only made a shallow cut in his opponent's skin, so he did nothing to stop Kai's fist from hitting him in the stomach.

In accordance with the laws of physics, the destructive burst of energy generated at the collision surface was partly transmitted into Adol as he received the attack, while another part of it was reflected back to Kai. If a guardian bearer's blessings meant that their flesh was as tough as iron armor, then Kai's fist must have been equivalent to a cannonball. The impact had carried enough force to pierce through his opponent's defenses, allowing most of the destructive power to be transmitted into Adol's body.

"Lord Adol!" Myula yelled.

By that point, Kai's kumadori was already fading.

When Adol was hit by Kai's iron fist, his body was sent flying backward, bent double, as if he'd been hit with a battering ram. Adol smacked right into the second residence's stone wall at the end of the room, turning much of the wall into a pile of stone rubble.

The stone walls forming part of the massive building had been broken apart like a pile of building blocks as the kinetic energy from Adol's body was transferred into it. It was then that everyone understood just how much power Kai could put into one of his attacks when he got serious.

As Adol's body lost kinetic energy to the stone material, he was just barely able to catch hold of the floor within the castle and bring himself to a stop. Unsupported stone structures then began to collapse around him under their own weight, causing Myula to scream and rush over to get below his master.

It had looked like a devastating blow. The attack had been so powerful that even a guardian bearer seemed unlikely to endure it without injury.

Even Kai, who was responsible for the attack, was left speechless by the damage caused by his own fist. He'd been up against a guardian bearer on the level of cinquesta, and he'd beaten him with a single punch.

But I still couldn't break through the skin...

If he'd struck with just his strengthened fingertips like the armored soldier had, it was possible that he might have torn a hole. He knew that even though Adol had suffered terrible damage to his internal organs, he was unlikely to die. It was common knowledge that guardian bearers didn't drop dead so easily.

So it was rather strange when the youth serving as Adol's attendant ran to him in a panic.

The guards standing by the entrance to the room finally began to become alarmed. The same fear arose in every one of the guards, and when Kai looked at them, it was enough to make about half of them run off. A woman who appeared to be a maid screamed and dropped to her knees.

Even the fight-obsessed Yohna was opening and closing his mouth as if trying to speak but not knowing what to say.

It was only then that Kai realized he might have gone too far.

From outside of the collapsed wall he could hear a lot of shouting. This was the second floor, so the rubble must have rained down on the ground from quite a height. To make matters worse, those outside were the many lords enjoying ritual contests.

When Kai moved closer to the hole in the wall, Myula, who was helping Adol to his feet, practically screamed, "Please! Don't come any closer!"

Adol was bleeding from many small wounds, but otherwise he didn't look particularly hurt. His wounds looked minor enough that any guardian bearer worth his salt could fix them up by wiping them away with a little spit.

"I knew it, Bro. You were hiding your power."

Kai stood rooted to the spot as Yohna walked over to stand beside him. He

lifted up the fist of Kai's limp arm to see whether Kai's fingers had been damaged, and he grunted with admiration as he did it.

"Never thought I'd see a sigiless smash through a cinquesta's protection."

"Get off me."

As Kai rudely brushed his hand away, Yohna looked down at Kai's head, which was at the same height as his chest, and sighed softly.

"What now, Bro? You gave him a good beating, but..."

"I'm in trouble now, aren't I?"

"I know you were mad about the whole jinx thing, but forget those guys. This one's trouble. You know he's Count Balta's son, right?"

"Should I run away?"

"Might be a good idea."

Adol's friend Myula listened nervously to Kai's conversation and watched him closely. He was faced with an opponent who could take down a cinquesta like Adol with a single punch. It was only natural to be cautious.

Suddenly, Kai heard someone speak in an unusually laid-back voice. "All right, I got this."

None of those present had noticed anyone approach, and they all looked toward the source of the voice in surprise. The winter scenery was visible through the large hole in the wall, but there was nothing resembling a floor that anyone could walk on.

The white figure that descended looked like a child even smaller than Kai.

"I'll take care of this pompous brat. Just give me a moment."

With a sky lit by a faint glow as a backdrop, its spread wings glittered like intricate glasswork. The child's neck was covered in fur like the puffed-up feathers of a small bird in the cold. With a precise motion of its wings, it entered into the room and, at first, it appeared to be looking around the living area, but then it looked straight at Kai. The wings that it folded up on its back were transparent and completely unlike those of a bird.

This strange white child looked like a combination of an insect and a human. The word that came to mind was “fairy.” The antennae hanging down in front of its hair were twitching and swaying.

Blue pupils like gemstones looked at Kai, and for a moment he didn’t know how to react, but then he realized there was a voice within his head.

You really overdid it, didn’t you?

Kai was being scolded by someone, but the only thing in front of him was a weird demi-human that looked almost cute when it tilted its head. Kai didn’t know what to make of any of it, so he said nothing. The winged demi-human then knitted its brow slightly and pursed its lips.

Valley One. Got nothing to say? Don’t play dumb.

While Kai looked at the creature in shock, the thing was addressing him as the god of the valley.

You’re in my territory now, Valley One.

This creature was another protector.



Its white arm, like the arm of a small child, rose up for just a moment.

Myula had been fully absorbed in protecting Adol, but now he suddenly lost consciousness. This mysterious demi-human—the protector—had knocked Myula unconscious with a barehanded chop to the neck.

The fact that Kai's eyes and ears were capturing everything without problem was the very thing that had caused him to misunderstand the situation.

The only one there who had actually witnessed the creature that looked like a cross between a butterfly and a human was Kai. What Yohna saw was the unconscious Adol and Myula disappear into nothingness. Yohna immediately tried moving closer. The thin arm of the demi-human looked like it might break if someone grabbed it, but when that arm struck the body of the brain-dead brute of a village lord, he was knocked unconscious with ease.

“Lord Adol has vanished! But how?!”

When the guards simply pointed and yelled without moving closer, Kai finally knew what was happening.

No one besides himself could see the demi-human.

My name's Nevin. Ask Valley One if you want to know more.

Kai saw that this protector, who called himself Nevin of the blizzard, was only faintly visible in the winter sky for some reason, and he realized that there must be some sort of magic hiding Nevin from view. He was just lucky that it didn't work on him because of the vision given to him by the god of the valley's blessings. This creature had been able to hide himself completely from everyone else around.

Some part of Kai guessed that this must be some form of optical magic.

Yohna was a fairly tough tres sigil, but a single swipe from the creature's arm had knocked him down. Another part of Kai calmly acknowledged the threat that this creature posed.

I'll take care of the brat. Just don't go telling anyone about me.

Kai had no idea what Nevin intended to do, but if he was another protector, then perhaps there was a lot that he could do.

As Kai watched Nevin leave, he tried asking for advice on what to do next. The guards were blocking his path to escape.

Figure it out yourself. I'm not your keeper.

It was more or less what Kai had expected to hear.

He had no other option. Kai placed a hand against the edge of the crumbling hole and readied himself to follow after Nevin.

You're another protector?

Does it matter, Valley One?

What are you going to do now?

Nevin gave no response.

A non-human protector had been hiding there in the provincial castle. He had to be up to something.

As a fellow protector, Kai felt that it might be worth him getting involved if there was something important happening.

But Nevin was glaring back at him with his big eyes.

Don't get any funny ideas. I'll beat the shit out of you if you get in my way.

Beat the what...?!

Their friendly conversation had just taken an aggressive turn, leaving Kai stunned as Nevin disappeared from his field of view. Kai's ears must have had a lingering attachment to the creature because he could still hear his voice like a low rumble.

Go home. Go look after that valley of yours.

The message wasn't just directed at Kai, but also at the god of the valley within him. The god of the valley's reaction felt distant.

It was a strange sensation, like hearing someone else's conversation while

underwater.

This age isn't holding together too well.

*They *** not ****. Waiting ***** who decide ****.*

The human world's collapsing.

The voice that must have belonged to his god was still unclear to him, but it sounded like there was a conversation. Kai felt that he hadn't yet developed enough as a host vessel to fully understand it all.

The world isn't holding together?

The human world's going to collapse?

The conversation and all of their worrying statements were becoming more distant. Then Kai ceased to hear it completely, and his consciousness came drifting back to him.

It seemed as though everything had just happened within the blink of an eye.

Now that Kai had come to his senses, he leaped out through the hole.

**

The winter solstice banquet was to be held the next day, and the broad stone corridor deep within the first residence had filled up with people.

The light of wax candles gave off barely any scent as they pushed back the darkness of the corridor. Guards could be seen lined up on either side of the corridor, holding their spears with stern faces. Those who wished to be granted an audience had to pass through here, and when there were too many, they would line up and fill half the length of the corridor.

Lords from the borderlands, identified by their simple clothing, were few in number. Most were clothed in the elegant robes of the center and accompanied by attendants carrying gifts. These were those who had made sure that they would gain permission to attend the winter solstice banquet as the warden of the borderlands' invited guests.

They spoke in quiet voices as they used their idle time to collect information.

"It was a sly trick they played on Lord Valma."

“Indeed. Though he has shown us what it means to grasp an opportunity. He took action the very moment he heard.”

“Using House Sneel as a means of getting close to Lord Adol was shrewd too. Lord Adol is so utterly dependent on Count Sneel after all. It was the quickest way to establish a foothold.”

“I heard a certain chief attendant had connections to the second son. It just shows the value of making investments in advance. In any case, next it will be my house...”

“The next son likely to marry is the fourth son, Lord Flyuu. I hear he’s quite partial to ladies with blue eyes.”

“That may require an adopted daughter...”

“Whatever it takes to form connections.”

“Indeed. Simply relying on the king could result in the loss of long-held territories.”

“The soldiers of the borderlands are ferocious. If we can draw them to us when the time demands it...”

At the front of the line of waiting people was a thick door lit by dim lights, and within was the office of Count Balta.

“It appears he has finally finished speaking with his guest.”

“That dragged on for quite some time. I believe he was the lord from the borderlands whose daughter is to be wed.”

The door swung open, and there was some discussion between the guards inside and out. The nobles realized that the large thing that several guards then carried out was Count Balta’s guest. For a time, no one said anything as they watched the large man be loaded onto a stretcher.

They hurried off with him, and then the line of lords wishing to be granted an audience with the count began moving once more. The lords were all relieved, and they began to exchange rumors once more.

“Lord Moloch Vezin, was it not?”

“You don’t suppose he’s dead?”

“I think we had best assume he was merely sleeping.”

“If he can fall asleep while Count Balta is speaking, then he is as impressive as the rumors say. What was it they called him? The Iron Taurus?”

“I heard them shouting at one another. Count Balta must have used whatever methods they use in the borderlands to make people be quiet. No matter how confident he might have been in his own strength, when faced with a man such as Count Balta, he is no more than a child addressing an adult.”

“I suspect you’re right.”

“We must tread lightly to ensure we do not provoke the count ourselves.”

“Lightly indeed.”

While the nobles were absorbed in their gossip, a white figure was strolling by.

This white demi-human had a small body that could only be described as misshapen, and as if it was some phantom with no existence in reality, no one paid attention to it. It slipped through the open door together with the next guest, and then the door closed tightly once more.

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While the trouble was occurring in the second residence, another sort of trouble was happening elsewhere in the provincial capital.

The group covered the mouths of two soldiers and rendered them unconscious before they could scream, and then several of them pulled open and unlocked the iron door, allowing the group to slip into the dark space within.

“Flames, arise.”

They used fire magic to push back the oppressive darkness. It was a group of about 10 people, and all of them were priests.

“Today will be our final chance to investigate. If we must resort to heavy-

handed means, then so be it.”

“But we must take care not to incur his anger.”

“We are dealing with a mighty arch god of the human kingdom. We must assume that at least some information surrounding the circumstances on our side has been revealed to him.”

“In addition to the great responsibility of guarding the northern territory, Count Balta has repeatedly been forced to send his soldiers to spill their blood in the south. His dissatisfaction must be building up. The stage is set for him to resort to a taboo.”

“First, you must cast such prejudice aside. We did not come here to expose the sins of House Balta. The prophecy is certainly a distraction, but the true duty of the priesthood is to discover the root of the heresy hidden in this land and to restore it to righteousness through our teachings.”

Gon-no-sōzu Seluga was lit by the blue flame that burned above his palm, and he spoke quietly with the other priests about their objectives.

Several of the priests also created their own flames and everything around them was suddenly freed from the darkness that had cloaked it. What they saw near the walls were the gods that were the foundation of Count Balta’s house—statues dedicated to the 200 land gods of the borderlands.

A mausoleum.

This was the gravesite that held the principal subject of worship for House Balta: Baalitoliga. Most of the gravesites of land gods in this world were sites where important rituals were carried out, so they were protected from rain and wind. The same circumstances that shaped the residences of the other lords of the borderlands also applied to the provincial capital.

The base of the first residence, which was the largest castle building in the provincial capital, was mostly occupied by the mausoleum of Baalitoliga.

A gravestone was in the deepest part of this mausoleum, and large sculpted gods towered over it as if standing guard. With Baalitoliga at the center, five smaller flanking gods stood at either side. They were perhaps statues representing powerful gods of the Holy Northern Crown.

“These are great gods, but this is exaggerated.”

“The construction of these great statues was permitted by the first king Yashadara in recognition of the loyal service of his god generals.

“The Baalitoliga that has been worshiped by generations of House Balta is a seventh setocentos holy sigil, if I am not mistaken. The world is such that great gods tower far above us as we crawl before them like mere ants.”

“We have not the time for such carefree talk, Gon-no-sōzu.”

“We have only until tomorrow morning. We have searched every location of interest within the territory, and yet all of our efforts to find the evidence we so desperately seek...”

“...Have led us to realize that it is here we must search. Let us take heart, for our efforts have taught us this.”

Seluga looked at the other priests, and then they spread out within the mausoleum.

They used fire magic to light their way and found that several offerings were dotted around before the statues of the gods. Tubs filled with the five grains (wheat, proso millet, foxtail millet, sorghum, and black soybean) and dried foods such as dried meat had already been given in offering here the previous day.

“Do not forget proper etiquette before the gods when moving these offerings. Never forget that the eyes of the count’s house are always watching, and carry yourself accordingly. Take particular care before the gravestone of Baalitoliga. Suppose that you are touching the very nose of the warden of the borderlands himself.”

Seluga went directly to the gravestone of Baalitoliga and recited a brief prayer before running his finger along the markings carved into its surface.

The size of the gravestones that served as the bodies of gods in the borderlands gave no indication of the level of divinity. The difference was seen in the intricacy of the markings that were visible on its surface and the amount of information they carried.

There is some disturbance beyond my understanding within this sigil... There is no doubt that this is related to taboo... Whatever the circumstances may be, we were right not to ignore this.

Seluga breathed a sigh.

House Balta's winter solstice banquet had caused almost every guardian bearer in the borderlands to gather here.

Just like every other year, Maas had answered Count Balta's invitation by dispatching priests to preside over religious rites for the month of offering. The group of priests, Gon-no-sōzu Seluga included, had been guests in Baltavia, Count Balta's primary settlement, for about a month. In addition, several truthseekers had been dispatched around the same time, and they were taking the opportunity to investigate the vast domain of House Balta as thoroughly as time would allow. They explored the five fortress towns of the Holy Northern Crown that supported House Balta and visited the villages that contained the gravestones of other land gods.

Naturally, this behavior caused great displeasure to Count Balta himself, but when asked for his assistance with a truthseeking mission conducted in the king's name, the count had no choice but to cooperate with their surveys in order to prove that he had nothing to hide.

They had kept it secret from the count, but Gon-no-sōzu Seluga had been given secret orders. While conducting his truthseeking mission, they were also conducting a completely different survey.

There are those here guilty of taboo. These fools will bring the end of days upon us.

The human nation had a religion centered on the worship of the great king god. Priests seeking to learn more of the nature of the gods and the core truths of the world started by constructing temple quarters, which later developed into the main monastery of the Manu religion, known as Maas.

Vast wisdom had been amassed by the scholars of Maas. Experience combined with trial and error took humans closer to the level of gods, and gave rise to many enlightened pahvahl priests who ascended to the level of gods and gained hidden power so great that not even kings and lords could ignore them.

The land of the disobedient god spoken of by the prophecy has also been established. The borderlands to the north... perhaps at the eastern most limit... The recent details regarding the eastern region communicated to us in the name of truthseekers Atalah and Jalkah are truly astonishing.

The reality of the situation was still uncertain.

A new guardian bearer thought to have been raised among koror was steadily becoming established within the great forest to the north.

Two priests who'd searched the area had engaged in combat with them only to sustain heavy wounds that forced them to retreat back to the village of Lag. They were waiting for their wounds to heal and had requested that further reinforcements be sent to them. The gon-no-sōzu was acquainted with both of these priests. They had both ascended to the level of pahvahl and gained sigils, so he knew whatever foe they had been unable to overcome had to be quite powerful.

That was a separate incident occurring in the borderlands.

It was then that the gon-no-sōzu remembered the strange child he'd seen carrying the sacred color. While investigating, he'd learned that the child was from Lag, and that he'd been brought by House Moloch as their servant.

It could be that Count Balta's dissatisfaction may be just one aspect of the changes happening in the borderlands.

The gon-no-sōzu cursed the fact that he'd been given so little time. If House Moloch had only arrived a little sooner, he might have been able to learn more about the child. For now, he needed to focus on what was before him.

His fingers traced the sigil of Baalitoliga, and he began to decipher the inscriptions.

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It was the last night before the banquet, and it was growing late.

There seemed to be endless work to do throughout the entirety of the provincial castle, and it went on through what was left of the night.

Many guardian bearers had no real need for sleep, so they remained active during those dark hours, and arguments between selfish guests with more strength than they knew what to do with continued. It would start with a drunken argument over something small, and when these continued and became large-scale brawls, it was as though every guest turned out to cheer for them. It was that sort of night.

It caused servants of the count's household to be busy all night long. Although the attack on a noble in the second residence had been violent enough to destroy part of the building, the incident remained unexplained because there'd been little time to investigate. Kai remained hidden for a while, fearing he would be pursued. When he showed himself again, he was initially cautious, but he soon strolled through corridors back to his room when he found no one was paying him any attention.

Kai had been gone a long time as a result of having to hide, and although he was relieved to see that Lady White had regained her strength, Lord Olha scolded him for being so slow in his work. He gave Kai the punishment he knew would hurt him most: he ordered him to miss supper. Needless to say, a stunned Kai was left with his stomach rumbling.

By that point, the members of House Moloch had gathered in the infirmary within the first residence. They'd been informed that Lord Vezin, who had always been a picture of perfect health, had suddenly collapsed while negotiating with Count Balta and had to be carried here. They hadn't believed it, but the man in the infirmary bed was unmistakably Lord Vezin.

The young doctor who was caring for him told them, "I hear that he became terribly passionate during his discussion with Count Balta and then had to be held down by everyone present. He was already in this state when they brought him here."

They hadn't been able to hold him back with force alone, so a strong medicine had been used to make him sleep. Rendering the Iron Taurus unconscious must have required an unbelievably powerful medicine.

After everything that had happened, the members of House Moloch were now deeply suspicious, and they didn't take the explanation they were given at

face value.

Lord Olha felt sure that some medicine was being continuously administered so that his father could not escape the city, and the look on his face was enough to intimidate the doctor. Lady White fearfully clung to her father's large hand. The banquet would begin before they could act, and Lady White was in a pitiful state as she waited to be forced to wed.

A medicine that makes guardian bearers sleep?

That idea alone was hard to believe.

Guardian bearers had such high poison immunity that they could drink alcohol and barely get drunk, so the idea of a drug strong enough to leave them unconscious for an entire night was naturally going to make Kai suspicious.

When the doctor wasn't watching, he examined the baron's body himself and found that the raw spiritual energy overflowing from his body was cloudy and weak around his chest, which was something he had seen before. He knew how the diabo's curse could knock down a healthy guardian bearer with a single touch, so he guessed that this situation would be easy enough to deal with in the same way.

It may have been that the count had learned some sort of secret technique himself. As a high-ranking noble who governed many other lords in the borderlands, it would make sense for him to have inherited some technique for suppressing guardian bearers.

The face of the irritating protector came to Kai's mind, and he couldn't help but think that he was involved.

I could probably heal this, Kai thought, but if this was that protector's trick, then it would be very possible that healing the baron would be getting in the protector's way.

The protector had warned Kai not to get in the way. If that was more than a hollow threat, and if the protector was helping the count to achieve some goal, then thoughtlessly healing the baron now could bring on the wrath of the protector. Kai wondered whether he was willing to fight with that creature and whether he thought he would survive such a fight. Then he breathed a small

sigh and let his clenched fists relax.

I don't know anything about that thing, but the count wants this marriage to go ahead and he's not about to let the baron leave. He wants Lady White to marry his son no matter what, and he wants his house tied to House Moloch... But I don't get why.

His power had brought together many of the lords of the borderlands and he had the blessings of a god greater than any other in the north, so it seemed there was little reason for him to be so fixated on making ties with House Moloch when it was no more than a minor house on the edge of the territory.

Even if their success in repelling the macaque army had caused them to be grossly overestimated, they were no more than a hundred soldiers with three land gods led by a quart sigil.

There had to be some other advantage to the marriage.

If it all goes ahead, will something special happen...?

The world was collapsing.

That was what Nevin had said. It was unclear whether it was related to Lady White's marriage, but there was certainly something going on.

Nevin had acknowledged Kai as a protector and had told him not to interfere. In other words, he saw Kai as a potential obstacle in their plans.

If they couldn't run, then he would do what he could to protect the people of House Moloch. He had been told not to interfere, but then was also prevented from running away, so he did not feel he could be blamed if it resulted in him interfering in the end.

If that meant they had to fight, then they would have to fight. Once Kai had accepted that, he felt his heart become calm.

"I've decided we'll remain here by my father's side until tomorrow morning. We can take it in shifts. Don't let your guard down."

"Got it."

Several blankets were carried into the room where the baron slept and the three of them used these to wrap themselves up while they slept. It was not

easy to fall asleep while lying on the cold stone floor, but for some reason Lady White must have been at ease in the cramped room filled with people, because she fell asleep as soon as she lay down. Lord Olha took one look at his sister's sleeping face and then picked up a large wooden prop left by the entrance. He must have intended to use it as a weapon. He then fell asleep while holding his knees.

Once the two of them were finally asleep, Kai alone took up the position outside the entrance to the room and took responsibility for the night watch. Several times, someone attempted to enter the room in the darkness, but each would-be intruder was sent away with fresh injuries. Once Kai's skills became apparent, they gave up on their attempts to approach him, though Kai still felt their eyes on him. It was fortunate that the room was at the end of the corridor with no windows.

At long last, morning came.

Or perhaps, it was still too early to be called morning, because the sun still hadn't risen. The only reason they knew it was morning was because the doctor who'd attended the baron throughout the night had knocked loudly on the door and then poked his head into the room to tell them so.

It still felt like night.

"Members of House Moloch, the time has come."

They were provided with cloths and a tub filled with hot water. Women who must've been under orders rather rudely peered into the room and then made a quick retreat after confirming that all of the members of House Moloch were gathered in one place.

They found no poison needles embedded within the cloths.

Since the sun had not risen, the air felt no different to the nighttime air and it was cold enough within the castle to turn one's breath to white clouds. Despite how early it was, the presence of people walking around outside the corridor and within the infirmary could still be felt.

A strange sort of activity had begun to fill the provincial castle.

Although the sun had not yet risen, the ritual of the winter solstice banquet

was already underway.

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The winter solstice banquet.

The day of that important ritual had finally come.

The ritual had begun before sunrise, while it was still dark. In every room where a lord was staying, callers appeared to wake them up, and everyone was forced to leave their beds. That all happened about a toki before sunrise.

The guests made themselves presentable, and amid a commotion that seemed out of place while it still felt like nighttime, they headed for the first residence where the banquet was to be held. Snow that must have piled up during the night had been neatly trodden down so that it wouldn't be a hindrance to people within the castle. Under the light of burning torches, a line of people, like a funeral procession, climbed the slope of the ridge on which the provincial castle was constructed.

As sunrise approached, the wintry weather did not improve, and the night sky looked ashen in color as light snow fell. Those being ushered into the first residence would first need to shake great volumes of snow from their clothing.

Then great iron doors a little way into the first residence opened, and all of the guests were held by the vast space that lay within. This hall where they could hear religious chants being recited by priests called in from the center, and where they could feel the vibrations from the percussion instruments those same priests played, was none other than the gravesite of Baalitoliga, the principal subject of worship of House Balta.

Lords everywhere tended to own structures that covered the principal gravesite from which they drew power, and the owner of this residence was no different in this respect, his was merely larger in scale. The first residence of the provincial capital lay on the highest part of the ridge, and this spot had been chosen because this was where the gravesite of Baalitoliga lay.

Beyond the iron doors the great hall was 50 yules wide and 100 yules long, and it was supported by immense pillars and arches. The guests stepped on the crimson carpet lying in its center as they made their way to the massive statue

in the deepest part of the hall. The statue representing Baalitoliga was strikingly large, and House Balta had once ordered for it to be carved in order to show the magnificence of their house.

To either side of it, statues of gods that offered their strength to House Balta were towering above the flickering flames of candles that lit the hall. Each statue had been provided with its own pedestal where offerings could be placed.

At the foot of Baalitoliga, the greatest god of them all, every variety of food from across the world appeared to have been collected, and a high priest sat cross-legged facing those offerings together with other priests who served him. They recited solemn holy chants, played flutes, and played crotales whose golden discs filled the air with their chiming each time they were struck.

Behind the priests was a stone pedestal that gave out smoke from burning incense continuously. The visitors who came to this temple recited long holy chants. They reasserted their undying loyalty to the warden of the borderlands, expressed their gratitude to the spirits of their ancestors who had been pioneers in the borderlands, and vowed to defend their country. Finally, they'd throw a small piece of incense into the burning charcoal.

In keeping with the old name of "Month of Offering," they would raise a glass given to them by the chair of the ceremony toward the ceiling, they would pour a small amount into a large jug that was set there, and then they would drink the remaining contents in one go.

With that, the guest would have completed their part of the ritual.

What they're really offering up is spiritual energy...

As he felt the alcohol burn his throat on the way down, Kai looked up at the towering statue of Baalitoliga. Then he looked beyond that to the vast ceiling above his head.

Kai's eyes could see the faint columns of spiritual energy rising from guardian bearers as they said their prayers, and he saw how it rose far above their heads. It would condense near the ceiling of the hall to form thick clouds and then it would gradually flow through small openings like smoke searching for a way out. They were quite literally offering up their spiritual energy as they said their

prayers to the gods and the spirits of their ancestors.

“Let’s go, Kai.”

As soon as the morning of the banquet arrived, the baron had regained consciousness as if nothing had ever been amiss, and he led the members of his house. Lord Olha, Lady White, and then Kai followed after the baron.

Guests who had completed their ritual would mingle with the small groups that naturally formed as they drank in the hall. The groups were most likely groups of lords who’d formed ties of blood, as was common here and there in the borderlands, so that they could foster solidarity and strengthen their own individual alliances. Groups formed on this small scale ensured the safety of each lord.

A group called out to beckon the baron over. It was probably the usual place for House Moloch to be. But the baron merely waved back and did not approach them.

Beyond that group was another. It was a large circle of guests positioned closest to the statue of Baalitoliga.

“I see you have awoken, Iron Taurus.”

The man that waved and called out to the baron was Count Balta himself.

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That group of drinkers were the guests of honor, and every lord in attendance must have wished they could drink with them at least once.

First Count Balta, and then visiting nobles from the center in multicolored robes so elegant that they seemed out of place, raised their cups and happily invited House Moloch to join them. Lord Valma Colsarouge was among them, and when he introduced himself to the baron with a fake smile, the baron did not smile back.

Kai’s pose was not so far from a martial arts stance as he remembered the incident involving the jinx the day before, but a stern look from Lord Olha brought him back to his senses. In a manner that was common to nobles, smiles

suddenly appeared on the faces of the siblings of House Moloch and they joined the group while exchanging pleasantries with the man who wished them harm.

No one had shown any real interest in Kai, and even when he stood behind the sitting members of House Moloch, no one spoke to him, and he remained standing.

All around them, even the lowest of nobles had brought attendants, and those attendants generally kneeled a short distance from the groups of drinkers, ready to fulfill any instructions given by their masters. Occasionally their masters would offer them food or drink, and they would make an effort to appear hesitant before accepting.

As long as no one was paying him attention, Kai took the opportunity to take another look around this huge mausoleum.

Kai noticed something that the baron was probably already aware of. A lot of people nearby were looking at the members of House Moloch. Their attitudes had changed greatly after the baron had sat down with the guests of honor.

Some of them look happy for him, and some are looking at him like he's stupid.

The lords of the borderlands would seldom gather, but now that they were all together in this one hall, some shared feelings could be felt among them.

The other group of friendly lords had tried to call House Moloch over with good intentions, but the nearby lords who came from the middle of the borderlands looked cold and judging.

As if they were affected by the manners and customs of the nation's center, they wore flashy and colorful clothes similar to those worn in the center, making this a part of their own regional culture. Their cold looks were not simply aimed at House Moloch, but also at the drunken guests of the group and at the very nobles from the center who they were trying to emulate.

Kai's sharp ears heard them whispering, "Even the collapse of the Northern Crown would not discourage them," and "These braggarts cannot even defend their own land," and other expressions of dissatisfaction they struggled to hold back. Kai didn't understand much of it.

Kai was surprised to hear his own stomach rumble. There was a lot of food piled on the plates within the group of revelers. The good smells that they gave off were overpowering, and they reached Kai's nose with just as much intensity as the scent of incense.

"Count Balta, then it is true."

"You bore me, Taurus. Do you mean to question my judgment?"

The baron would not stop asking the count about the treatment of his daughter.

Count Balta's decision had been made, and getting him to change his mind was no small task. The center nobles around them were watching the disagreement very closely. In particular, Count Valma, whose daughter was to be the first wife, listened to their exchange very carefully.

As expected, it was the baron who lost out in the end. Kai felt a little irritated by the sight of the baron's dejected figure. It was hard to believe that this was the same man who'd taught him that guardian bearers always had many options available to them.

But then again, Kai had no way of knowing what sort of obligations House Moloch might have to fulfill to ensure their continued existence.

"I trust that you have not forgotten about the terms of our agreement."

"Yes, yes, of course. I will see to it... Now let us raise another toast, Taurus."

"I would be honored."

They raised one toast after another while Count Balta happily reminded the center nobles that his son was to marry a lady from House Moloch.

He received many congratulations, but the way their cold, scheming eyes mismatched their forced smiles was rather unsettling. It was clear that not a single one of them had any care for a girl born to the lord of a tiny village in the borderlands.

It must have been the father of the other bride who felt the most animosity toward House Moloch, but Count Valma was the first to stand up and declare a toast to congratulate House Moloch. When he looked at Lady White with a

smile, she was screaming internally. She understood that with every kind word Count Valma spoke, he was thinking the exact opposite.

Eventually the baron looked at them, and Lord Olha stood up to lead Lady White away. Apparently, it was necessary for her to change her outfit before the engagement could be formally announced. Now was the time for her to wear the formal attire that the women of the village had all worked on together. The two stood up and told Kai to follow as their attendant.

Kai felt there was something very wrong with this engagement, and he couldn't shake off a desire to protect Lady White. He felt it all the more so because it was obvious that Lady White herself had no desire to go through with the marriage.

Then he suddenly remembered something.

If he's the one pushing for this engagement, I could expose him as the one pulling the strings and it would all come to nothing.

That protector was probably watching everything that happened in this mausoleum while using his magic to keep hidden from view. Kai could find him and make him change his mind. If talking wouldn't work, he could talk with his fists. Kai felt that this was an option that was still available.

Then Kai saw him.

Above his head, beyond the cloud of prayers near the ceiling of the mausoleum, he saw the laid-back protector was looking right at him.

Protector Nevin looked back at Kai and gave him a faint but meaningful smile.

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When her father had told her to become a second wife and then left to negotiate with Count Balta, she couldn't deny that some part of her had thought that all of this talk of marriage was about to disappear. If the discussions between the two parents went well, the lady from the center would marry first, and Jose might just return to her village. As a lady from a minor domain in the borderlands, Jose felt that a more modest marriage would be appropriate for someone in her circumstances. However...

Jose saw the two fathers talking happily together, and she struggled to accept the fact that her own fate had already been decided without her understanding anything. It was clear that the marriage was to go ahead.

She felt it keenly when her brother looked at her with concern.

House Moloch was a minor domain on the edge of the borderlands, and it lacked the power needed to go against the will of the powerful warden of the borderlands who held authority over the entirety of the vast territory. Although the lords of the borderlands acted as though they lived according to their own rules, each lord faced a constant struggle to maintain their own land, and without aid from neighboring villages, their land would soon be destroyed by demi-humans. There were very few lords who could single-handedly provide the various goods demanded by the daily lives of their subjects. Any child raised in a lord's household would have at least a smattering of knowledge regarding how their territory was governed, and that was enough for them to realize the seriousness of inviting the warden of the borderlands' displeasure.

Jose stood up when her brother urged her to do so, but she couldn't stop her legs from trembling. When she couldn't even walk in a straight line, she had to cling to her brother's back as he led the way.

"That must be Lord Ashna."

She followed her brother's gaze and saw a young man who was looking over at her with great curiosity. He had only just reached adulthood, and so he did not yet have a first wife. He was probably around the same age as Kai, but he hadn't been raised in an unsophisticated village like Kai had, and the look in his eyes suggested that he saw women as commodities, each with a given value. Women had likely served beneath him ever since he was a very young age. She got the impression that he was well-experienced but not fully developed emotionally, because when he looked at her, his eyes were childlike, and yet they burned with a young man's hunger. He made Jose shudder, even though she was older than him.

It was difficult for her to relax when those eyes were following her constantly, but she was able to collect herself when she felt the presence of Kai following behind them. Kai was growing to be strong and dependable, and it made Jose

breathe a sigh of relief when Kai seemed to position himself where he would block the gaze of her future husband.

Other lords were still performing their offering rituals, so Jose and the others weren't particularly noticeable as they moved through the hall. At some point, a familiar maid from House Balta had taken up position in front of her brother and was now guiding them. They were being led to a rear entrance where many hurried servants were going in and out.

"Please wait here," the maid told them before hurrying off.

In her place, several other women who had been expecting them surrounded them and brought Jose's formal attire to her. She looked around and some of the belongings they'd left in the room had been placed in the corner of this waiting room.

"She finally showed up."

"...!"

Jose could not suppress the shiver that ran down her spine when she heard the unexpected voice.

There was another group in that same room. A girl surrounded by maids was glaring at Jose.

It was Florence, a daughter of Count Valma who was to be wed at the same time. She was wearing an outfit so splendid that it made the clothing that the women of Lag worked so hard to produce look terribly crude by comparison.

Red peony flowers—a popular favorite among nobles in the center—had been sewn directly into clothing made from lavish amounts of shimmering crimson fabric, and the swaying petals covered the fabric from the tight part around her waist up to the area just below her long sleeves.

Advanced techniques and an incredible amount of labor had gone into the embroidered peonies, made from silk thread, that made Florence look all the more splendid. In addition to her clothes, a profusion of hair ornaments hung from her hair, and they made rattling sounds each time she moved her head.

"That's your formal attire? Some hand-me-down from your aunt, I presume?"

Jose knew that Florence was belittling her for wearing clothes made on the edge of the borderlands where no one understood the trends of the center, but she didn't react. Every woman in the village had toiled for many days to prepare this clothing. And those women had not tailored the outfit without any thought. They knew that Lady Moloch Jose had been born with little pigment to her skin, and they had thought carefully about what design would suit her well.

A precious dye that could be obtained in the borderlands, extracted from the petals of blue flowers, had been used to dye the clothing the color of the sky on a fine day. The thick fabric, woven from cotton, did not look out of place at all in the cold climatic region of the borderlands. It was embroidered with floral patterns first designed by her ancestors, and it was tight around her waist, with a long skirt that trailed along the floor just like in times of old.

It made her white hair look like a cloud drifting through a summer sky. That was how Jose thought of her own appearance as she put on the clothing and stood with her head held high.

It was true that she did not want this marriage.

But that was no reason for her to think less of the fine clothing that had been prepared for her.

As Jose's gaze met that of Florence, the two girls sent showers of invisible sparks flying.

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Even in Lag, Kai had had opportunities to attend a marriage banquet or two.

They'd been a far throw from this grand event with every lord of the borderlands in attendance, but the basic way in which the guests congratulated the bride and groom-to-be was more or less the same.

While the two women, now wearing their formal outfits, were waiting for the ceremony to begin, the man himself appeared with his attendants in tow. When Kai saw him, he breathed a sigh at the thought of this man becoming Lady White's husband.

The sixth son, Ashna.

Much like Adol who had visited them earlier, Ashna was rather short, and his thin body resembled that of Count Balta when viewed from behind. He probably hadn't finished growing, and his thin arms resembled the arms of a woman because they had no muscle. He looked like he might break if anyone grabbed hold of him too tightly.

Ashna moved closer to the two women who would be his wives and spoke to them in a way that sounded overly familiar while his eyes were clearly engaged in assessing their worth. Florence looked a little irritated, but she had clearly been ready for this, and she held out her chest proudly.

In contrast, Lady White trembled with embarrassment and made herself small. Lady White's displeasure seemed to excite Ashna all the more because he continued to leer at her without a hint of remorse, and a smile formed on his lips as he did so.

He was a young man with a handsome face, and he may have been trying to act like an apathetic son of a high-ranking noble, but the effect was lost because his youthful feelings of lust were clear to see. He merely made himself appear vulgar to those around.

What's this guy's problem? Kai muttered under his breath.

Lord Olha must have had similar thoughts. He smiled faintly while quietly moving closer to Lady White where he'd be between her and Ashna.

Ashna scowled at Lord Olha through upturned eyes and then looked away as if he'd lost interest.

"The worshipers will soon be finished," he said in a high-pitched voice that emphasized his youth. "My father will come to greet you, and after that you'll come with me."

His servants offered drinks to the two women.

Some other servants then brought in some small portions of various types of food. This must have been the young lord's way of showing his concern for those stuck here in the waiting room. Kai's stomach rumbled.

Kai tried not to let his eyes be drawn toward the food he could smell, and instead he looked over at Lady White. As before, she looked as though she was

having trouble accepting Ashna. This marriage felt like a waste, and Kai couldn't help but wish that it wasn't going to happen.

Things had gone well beyond the point where Kai had any right to get involved. But after some silent contemplation he decided he would do as he pleased. His self-confidence as a guardian bearer made it easy for him to cast his reservations aside.

Ruining a few marriage plans wouldn't kill anybody. He could choose his means carefully so as not to do anything that the baron wouldn't forgive him for. He was, after all, the leader of the nation in the valley, so it was only natural that he should act according to his own desires.

Lord Olha was by Lady White's side, so he could leave things to him for now.

Kai decided to take action by himself.

First, I need to grab hold of him.

Kai crept out of the room and then stared up at the ceiling of the mausoleum.

The fastest way to stop this marriage would be to talk to the protector who was no doubt pulling the strings. Kai had seen him in the corner of the ceiling earlier, but now he was gone.

The highest part of the ceiling in the center must have had some multilayer structure that concealed ventilation holes because the clouds of spiritual energy were swirling towards that location as if drawn in by the recess in the center.

Maybe he went out the same way...?

An old castle like this one was bound to have more than a few secret passageways. There needed to be several passageways in this mausoleum that the count and his family could use if they ever needed to escape.

The towering walls of the mausoleum had barely any footholds, so climbing them was going to be difficult.

Another option would be to take a run up and then jump. It was a common way of thinking for any guardian bearer, and Kai would have done it, but the mausoleum was crowded with people and there wasn't enough space anywhere for him to run.

As Kai searched for another way up, he threaded his way through the crowd of people waiting in line to perform their offering rituals. Finally, Kai noticed the massive iron chandelier hanging from the ceiling by a chain.

The chain passed through a pulley and must have once been used to haul the chandelier up to the ceiling. The chain needed to extend down to some low place within easy reach, and Kai found that place hidden behind a great pillar where the chain was firmly wound around a reel with a crank.

Without a moment's hesitation, Kai leapt onto the chain and began to climb upwards. This old rusted chain barely swayed under the weight of Kai's small body. Kai chuckled to himself when he found how sturdy it was, and then reached forward to continue clambering up.

He stopped when he was surprised by a voice calling to him from below.

"Whatcha doin', Bro?"

It was Gand Yohna.

Yohna had just entered the mausoleum and had been about to join the line of waiting worshipers.

Kai tutted and then put a finger to his lips, urging Yohna to be quiet. Yohna had been knocked out by Kai on one occasion, and he'd witnessed Kai's exceptionally powerful fire arts on another occasion, so now he was fascinated by Kai. "We gotta talk about what happened yesterday," Yohna shouted while moving closer like the ignoramus he was.

To make matters worse, several other guardian bearers who must have been Yohna's friends were also following behind him. They were the talentless clumps of muscle from before. Unlike during the ritual contests, everyone was dressed in formal robes and had made an attempt—though not necessarily an effective one—to look like a proper noble.

Kai despaired at Yohna's ignorance and then decided that his best option was to start climbing faster.

Kai hurriedly scrambled up the chain and soon reached the pulley that was supporting the chandelier. He paused there to look for footholds.

I can jump to there!

There was a distance of about five yules from the chandelier to the edge of the recess in the ceiling. The edge of the recess was surrounded by decorative stonework and he thought he could just about grab hold of it.

He'd realized that there was shouting going on below, but it seemed much more constructive to prioritize escaping rather than letting his attention be distracted. Kai needed to be in a position where he was at the right angle to jump, so he descended to one of the lower rings of the chandelier. Then he got into position, while taking care not to send drops of wax falling to the floor, and waited for the right timing while the great iron ring swung back and forth.

And then he jumped.

He heard loud voices shouting at him from below, but he paid them no mind.

His body swayed from side to side as he climbed a dozen yules higher using what little purchase his fingertips could find. He used his incredible strength to drag his body up higher.

He thought he heard Yohna shouting, "Bro!" but he didn't look back. In the corner of his eye, he saw the people shouting and others who looked like guards entering the mausoleum and he tutted to himself several times.

Thanks to Yohna, everyone would now know who he was. It was infuriating.

This must be it.

At the top of the recess, he finally found a hole that had been hidden from view behind a ledge. That was more or less where he'd spotted Protector Nevin.

With the ledge as a place to stand, Kai could rest easier as he shuffled sideways toward the hole. He continued climbing upward toward the surprisingly large hollow space within the hole. The area was filled with a fog of aura, which wasn't so much like warmth from the crowd of people below, but more like the oppressive heat felt when passing through a cloud of steam. Kai finally reached the highest surface of the ceiling.

He reached out for a dark area that looked like a ventilation opening and then he froze with surprise. He even forgot to clamber up to safer footing as he

stared in astonishment at what was carved into the surface of the ceiling.

Writing...

From a distance it had just looked like a pattern, but Kai realized that it was actually fine text. He couldn't help but be reminded of the inscriptions that were carved into the gravestones of land gods.

This writing was probably the same. It appeared to be packed into every part of the ceiling, leaving no empty space. The sight gave him goosebumps along with the same sense of psychological disgust that someone might feel when looking at a rash.

Not one of the guests seemed to realize that anything so bizarre and fascinating was right here above their heads. There had been members of the crowd who'd been pointing up at Kai, but now the majority were simply getting drunk and enjoying the banquet.

"Everyone prays... and then the spiritual energy collects... because of this."

All living things would naturally give out small amounts of spiritual energy.

Guardian bearers would continuously give out quantities of spiritual energy orders of magnitudes higher, but Kai had never seen the released energy collect up like mist.

If left alone, the spiritual energy from the prayers would have dissipated without taking any particular form, so the fact that it continued to collect near the ceiling seemed stranger and stranger the more Kai thought about it. He was completely certain that this odd phenomenon was occurring because of the writing that was carved into the ceiling.

Those lines of writing had some magical effect that prevented the spiritual energy offered up from naturally dissipating, causing it to gather here at the top of the mausoleum.

This whole mausoleum is like one magic device.

Even when he climbed up into the ventilation hole, he found the walls packed with more engraved text which he felt must have had some magical effect that drew the spiritual energy further up inside. He felt a slight breeze against his

hands and his wrists when he stopped moving, as if he could feel the flow of the spiritual energy as it was drawn in.

My brethren are hatching.

Kai heard a faint voice from some far-off place.

This voice that he could barely just catch was trembling with joy.

“Nevin!” Kai’s yell echoed off the walls of the hollow tunnel and gradually faded away.

Somewhere far away, Kai heard mocking laughter.

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It was possible that the world of humanity would end.

He did not believe it without reason. It was some time ago that he noticed a clouding in the power of the terrible human god who had placed the seal upon his land.

Long ago, he’d had no interest in the doings of humans, but now he watched, and soon he came to understand the cause of this clouding.

The tribe known as Balta had ruled over the ever-increasing number of humans in this land.

The first Balta had brought with him a mighty god from a faraway land. The mountain god, Baalitoliga, whose power reached across a vast area, was overthrown by Balta who overthrew him following an intense battle. Balta thus seized the blessings of the mountain god, making him the ruler of its land.

But as great as the mountain god was, the overthrowing of a single god was not the sole reason why humans were able to claim the entirety of a land so unfathomably vast as the northern plains. The humans that had sprung from the fertile lands to the south had already obtained many mighty gods, and the combined power of this multitude of gods made possible the swift eradication of the hundred or so different species that had dominated the plains. In doing so, they claimed blessings from each portion of the land, one god after another.

Balta gathered the devotion of each of these lower gods once they were overthrown, making Baalitoliga a mighty god without rival in the northern plains. The king of a particular species fought a long battle to ensure the survival of his kind, but finally, he was forced to bend the knee while his people were on the verge of extinction. In exchange for the life of his kind, Balta made him a slave.

He had lost track of how much time had passed since the death of the first Balta.

Their existence had been forgotten as hundreds of years passed by without mercy. While protecting his kind that had been sealed underground, he spent the years watching the current era go by.

What caused him to decide to do more than simply watch the time pass was an incident in which the current Balta, having noticed the clouding of his power, had tried to scrape away the curse engraved by his very own ancestors.

The poor old man was worried by the weakening of the blessings he received from Baalitoliga.

The ancient curse that generations of Balta had set with layer upon layer in the mausoleum was a form of sealing magic. It kept his kind sealed by the power of the mountain god. The old man had become convinced that this was merely a waste of his god's dwindling power.

When he first decided to show himself before the current Balta, the decision was made on a whim. The despairing old man, dripping with sweat and grease, had come to doubt his own king, and now he was undoing the work of his own ancestors. The situation was highly amusing. When he first saw the current Balta erasing the curse with his own hands, he couldn't help but laugh.

"Do you want to be stronger?"

He had grown tired of merely observing the vicissitudes of the world. He'd once followed his whims and found himself highly revered by the outside world as a protector, but that had only brought him enjoyment for a short time. The rise and fall of other races could not hold his interest forever. For almost a hundred years, he had done no more than observe the day-to-day exploits of Balta, without any real objective.

He had been watching the entire time and had come to understand that something was happening in the human world. Under orders from the king god of the humans, Balta dispatched forces to the chaotic southern plains. It was an ironic situation because the complete opposite had always happened in ancient times.

As a result, less attention was given to the gods of the northern plain, and humans gradually lost the power they needed to defend their land. Human lords could only collect together small armies, and their territory was gradually being eroded as they failed to drive back the demi-humans.

Their prized soldiers had been sent out in such numbers that the northern lands were left neglected, and soldiers were squandered in every instance while trying to defend the lands of others, all for the sake of allowing their incompetent king to save face. One of Balta's most trusted friends, the ruler of a fortress town, was dispatched into battle as a general, only to be defeated, and even their god was lost. The name of that loyal friend had been Pablus.

The tribe of Balta trembled in fear as they spoke of the Holy Northern Crown's downfall. It was at this point that officials began to openly protest against the dispatch of soldiers to the south.

"Just let me show you what to do."

The current Balta, Atahlkush, was a deeply distrustful man.

He watched Atahlkush's reaction partly for his own amusement as he teased him and stayed hidden from others. When others treated him like a senile old man, it was great fun. Atahlkush claimed he could see something that only the strongest individuals could see, but barely anyone believed him.

After he tempted Atahlkush time and time again, Atahlkush finally could ignore him no longer. Atahlkush spent day after day at home pouring through the books in his library. It was only when he was certain of the creature's origin that he was finally ready to listen.

King of the Winged Yaso.

This was how the current Balta addressed the creature.

A distant light was glowing in the winter sky.

Between the dull gray clouds that had brought the falling snowflakes, the faint color imparted by the sunlight was growing brighter. The small fraction of snowflakes that caught the sun looked like wheat falling through a sieve as they shone whiter.

The strange passageway that Kai was following was packed full of writing. The incline gradually became steeper and eventually it went completely vertical, forcing Kai to use his guardian bearer abilities to the full. His fingernails found purchase in the small cracks between the stones as he desperately clambered up and up.

It finally led him to the top of the tallest tower of the provincial castle.

The passageway had come to a stop on a slanted roof, and Kai crawled toward the outside through a hole in the side of that roof. Snow that had been left untouched since the start of winter had piled to form a wall before him.

Kai's face emerged like a mouse crawling out of its nest and through the white clouds he exhaled he could see the sky gradually brightening.

"Didn't you go home, Valley One?" a voice asked.

Kai turned his head and saw a white creature that was sitting on the roof of a separate tower.

This protector known as Nevin of the Blizzard had been watching Kai quietly.

"Didn't I say I'd beat the shit out of you if you got in my way?"

"I have my own problems to deal with. I don't take orders from you."

Nevin sounded disappointed as he exhaled loudly through his nose. His transparent wings fluttered and carried him closer. Kai wasn't fully out of the hole, so he made a rushed attempt to get into a fighting stance, but rather than attack as expected, Nevin offered Kai his hand. There would be no fight to the death just yet.

The hand felt warm as Kai took hold of it. Somehow it felt reassuring to know for sure that Nevin was a living creature.

As Nevin pulled up Kai, he left behind the warmth of the aura that filled the

passageway and suddenly felt the cold air enter into the gaps in his clothing. A little bit of cold air was no big deal for a guardian bearer, but the wind was strong and Kai wished he was wearing thicker clothes.

He still didn't understand the purpose of the aura tunnel he'd just traveled through. Aura that was only visible to people with good eyes like Kai had been directed to this place, but the reason for that was still unclear.

Nevin chuckled and looked upward as he pulled Kai to his feet.

It caused Kai to do the same, and when he looked up at the sky, he saw an astonishing scene unfolding.

What are those...?

The collected aura from the prayers of the lords of the borderlands was disappearing as it rose into the sky. What caused Kai to stare up in astonishment was the shapeless lights that had appeared beyond the cloud of aura.

Nevin said nothing. He simply stood there and watched it quietly. But the scene had left Kai speechless, and he could hardly make sense of what he saw.

They're eating it...?

It was like a school of fish gathering at the waterside as bait was thrown to them.

But they were moving through the sky at such a height that Kai thought they must be just a few yules below the clouds.

When viewed from so far away, one of these things looked to be about the size of a human arm. If Kai had seen it close up, he might have thought its size was actually similar to that of the provincial castle.

Some may have said that it looked like a celestial nymph with a long robe trailing behind her.

To Kai it just looked like a large carp with an abnormally long tail. Perhaps it was more like a misshapen snake.

"That's a god on the outside. Never seen one before?"

“...”

“It surprised me at first too.” Nevin smiled brightly.

“The banquet of offering’s supposed to be about offering prayers to the gods. They take the bait and it draws them toward their friends, the ground gods. Kinda weird, right?”

Ground gods? He must mean our land gods.

“But there’s no point just putting out the bait. You have to pull them in and get them enshrined. The thing is, humans forgot how to do it. I figured I’d lend a hand.”

Nevin’s body was shining slightly.

His ascending aura collected around his raised arms and shone more and more brightly.

“Living things get wiser as they grow older. Then they grow sick and weak. They lose all the wisdom they found and turn into idiots. The same goes for a species. If they survive long enough, their offspring are born stupid somehow. Same goes for my species. They turned into complete idiots.”

Nevin warned Kai not to get in the way.

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Nevin spoke of enshrinement.

What he referred to was a ritual, devised by humans, for calling upon gods from outside of the world and extracting their unnatural power.

The formless being of light wandering through some distant other place reacted to the aura that Nevin released, similarly to how it had been drawn in by the prayers of the lords of the borderlands. Its shapeless body writhed violently as it came descending from the sky.

Although they had no corporeal form, these things could move through the air of this world, sending out invisible gusts of wind in their wake. One such gust of air was about to send Kai flying backward, but he just barely managed to

cling on to the parapet of the roof.

Nevin was no less affected. While conducting the ritual that was drawing in the gods from outside, he misjudged the timing as he tried to escape the shockwave. It sent him rolling across the snow piled on the roof, and he continued to roll until he'd fallen over the edge.

Kai worried for a moment, but then remembered that Nevin could fly.

These gods... They're being sucked into the tower.

That might have been another effect of the magic device.

The entire building shook, and they could feel the unimaginable power that was being pulled in through the roof. A torrent of power passed through the tower and must have kept on going down to the lower levels of the mausoleum below.

Nevin came flying back up, looking uncomfortable as he tried to shake the snow from his head.

"Nearly blew myself up," Nevin mumbled absentmindedly to himself.

Kai wasn't so laid back. The massive amount of power that had just hit the mausoleum seemed likely to have caused some harm to the people inside. Kai cast an accusing glance at Nevin.

For a moment, Nevin looked puzzled. "Don't worry," he told Kai. "It's supposed to work like this."

Kai wasn't sure he could trust everything Nevin said. He jumped back into the vertical shaft that he'd just climbed out of.

Kai began to sweat as he felt that something bad was about to happen. He felt the warmth of the cloud of aura as he rapidly made his way back down the slope and returned to the hole in the mausoleum's ceiling. On the floor of the large hall, the lords of the borderlands who had been enjoying their food and drink were now standing up with alarm. The interior must have been shaken quite violently.

Kai climbed down further and jumped over to the iron chandelier. He took care not to lose his balance as the whole thing swayed. He looked down and

found the circle of people that included Count Balta and the baron. Right at that moment, the count was rising to his feet and shouting something or other.

Loud excitement was filling the hall, but the chanting of priests that had been part of the background noise had come to a stop. The gon-no-sōzu and other priests who had been offering prayers before the great statute of Baalitoliga now stood up and readied themselves. The lower priests quickly positioned themselves around the gon-no-sōzu.

Kai felt as though his eyes were being drawn toward the statue of Baalitoliga. The statue was hard to ignore because it was shining brightly as though it was overflowing with power. Kai realized that the gods that had descended were within that statue. Or more precisely, they were sealed within the gravestone of Baalitoliga at the base of that statue.

Count Balta once again shouted something that Kai couldn't make out, and then a burst of aura was released from his body. Then he began to shine so brightly that Kai had to squint, and it seemed that the count might burn up on the spot.

That looks like...

The blue aura surrounding the count was familiar to Kai.

For some reason, the count was continuing to cry out as he threw his body to the ground and desperately pressed his body to the stone floor like a man on fire.

He wasn't just crying out; he was screaming in agony as something tried to burn away his skin.

"Like a diabo..."

"Where'd you hear that?"

Kai hadn't noticed Nevin come back into the hall. It was as though this whole building was Nevin's home territory. He spread his wings and flew around without a care, but some magic stopped anyone from seeing him.

The count was still shining brightly as he rolled across the ground, but his skin didn't appear to be badly burned by the cursed blue fire. The other guardian

bearers around him were acting as though they'd never seen such light before. There was no physical form to the burning that engulfed his skin as if its very existence was forbidden.

As the count writhed in agony, he refused help from his attendants as he continued to cry out. Kai was surprised to hear him command that the banquet must continue. Count Balta was risking his life to perform the enshrinement that Nevin spoke of.

The attendants tried to hurry off somewhere, but then they were stopped by the priests who had for some reason ceased their chanting. An argument took place, but the count continued to yell at them until some managed to shake off the priests.

"In ancient times, this is when they'd hold the ritual contests, but humans have turned ignorant. It doesn't matter though. We've got a replacement this time."

"What do you mean, replacement?"

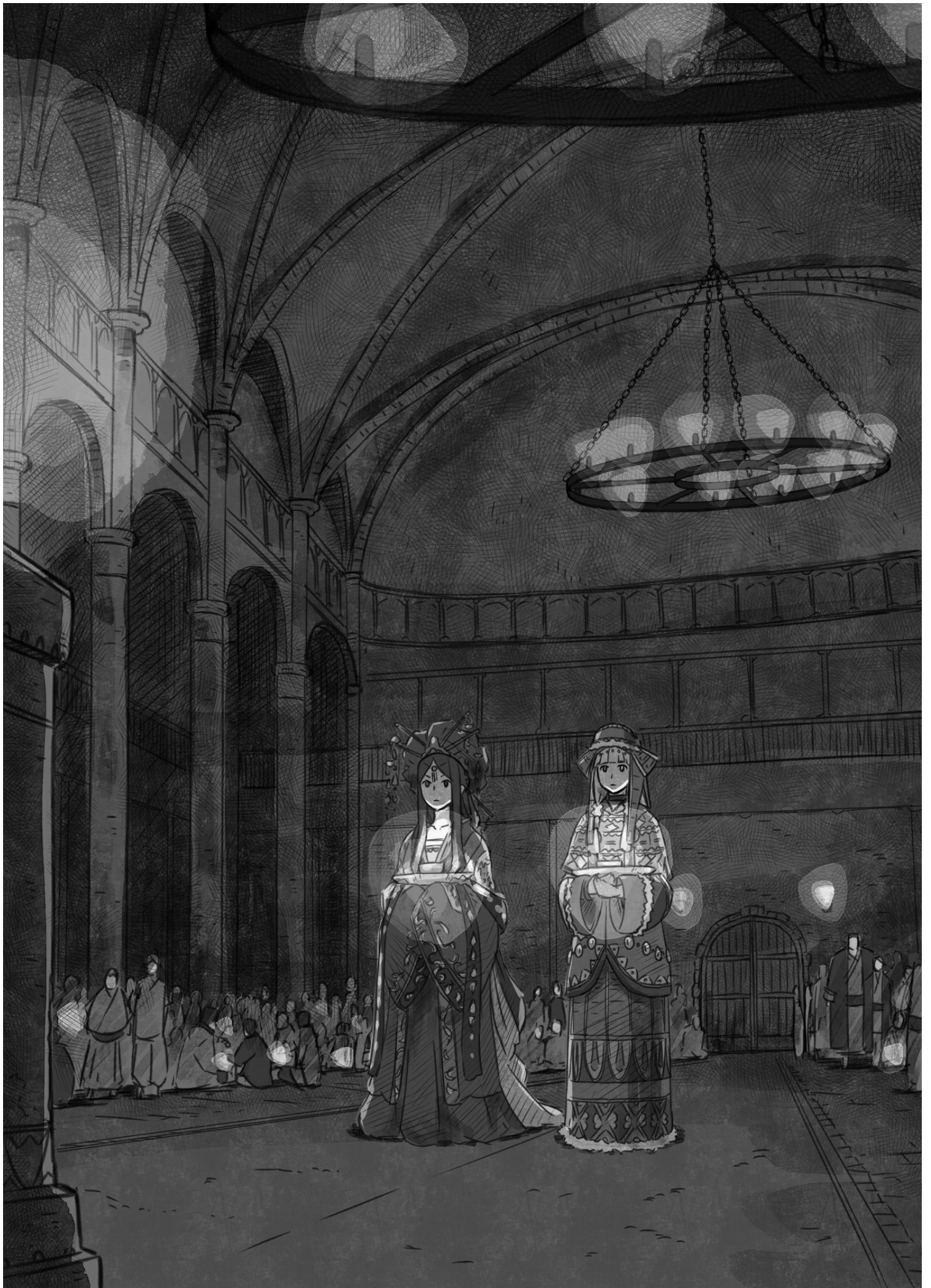
"You'll see. The gods from outside can't get enough of creatures from our world."

He turned away from Kai, who wasn't understanding anything.

The proud figure of Ashna, the sixth son who had no doubt missed everything that was happening, appeared from the waiting room upon hearing a prearranged signal.

The formally dressed ladies followed behind him.

Florence, the daughter of Lord Valma. And the pale-skinned daughter of House Moloch, who Kai knew very well.



“Humans have been giving them ‘pure maidens’ since long ago.”

It was unclear whether this was an historical practice with good foundation or whether it was some stupid idea that the predominantly male guardian bearers had come up with themselves.

Given that Nevin wasn’t human, he probably had no qualms with this idea himself. He was here because he wanted to witness the barbaric practice of human sacrifice.

When Kai acted surprised, Nevin just ignored him and continued to watch expectantly as the two ladies were guided to a podium, which was the altar set before Baalitoliga.

It turned out that Count Balta would not be allowing Lady White to marry.

Nevin muttered something about how amusing it was to watch a human sacrifice’s soul be torn away, causing Kai’s hair to stand on end.

Without thinking about what might happen next, Kai leaped from the chandelier.

“Stop!” Kai yelled, as loud as he could.

He yelled so loud that he felt his throat might be torn apart, but his voice was drowned out by the clamor of the people within the mausoleum. To break his fall, he caught the chain that was holding up another chandelier.

Kai cut the chain using his invisible sword. As if swinging from a vine, Kai dropped from the hanging chain to fall toward the podium.

“Lady White.” His voice finally reached her now that he was close.

Lady White on the podium looked up when she heard the sound of Kai’s voice. He had let go of the chain halfway through the swing, so he was traveling through the air at high speed. There was nothing else to grab onto, so he couldn’t have gotten there any faster. The more he concentrated, the more the flow of time seemed to slow down as he flew over the heads of several people and felt everyone’s gaze being drawn to him.

There were several screams from the people in the hall behind him as the chandelier crashed to the ground.

The baron and many of the nobles from the center stared at Kai as if he was an unfamiliar beast when he entered their line of sight.

Count Balta, who was bathed in blue light, looked at him with lifeless eyes. A strong-looking woman with long red hair falling down her back gazed at him in wonder and then went to grab a candlestick that was near to her.

He glanced down and saw that the priest, the one with the lofty title of gon-no-sōzu, was also looking up at him. He passed over several of their bald heads.

He was so close. He was almost there.

Lady White braced herself as Kai came flying towards her, but then she suddenly disappeared from his field of view. Likewise, the lady from the center in her red formal attire disappeared into the ground beneath her feet with a look of shock on her face.

Ashna was left looking around in confusion on the podium. They had all been standing in places that had been assigned to them for the sake of the ceremony. The two beautiful ladies who he thought would be his own had now disappeared from Ashna's sight, causing him to shriek like a child. A moment later, he too disappeared. He had foolishly stepped onto the same part of the floor that the two ladies had disappeared into.

Kai ran over to where they'd been standing.

What he saw was a round patch of blackness on the altar. He knew that this had been the hole they'd fallen into. Within the round blackness he could faintly see the carefully constructed stonework that formed this pitfall trap.

This was not merely a physical structure. The pitfall was operated using magic.

The magic was causing the hole to disappear in front of Kai's eyes. Kai panicked, but knew instinctively to create the invisible sword on his right hand, which he then swung toward the ground. The structure that was blocking up the hole was made of solid stone, but Kai's invisible sword could cut through it as if it was air.

Beneath a layer of stone he saw that the pitfall was still there.

The sounds of loud voices within the mausoleum grew distant as he leaped down into the hole. He kicked the stone walls periodically to control the speed of his descent as he fell. His steel-like hardness as a guardian bearer meant that he could wear away the rock as if his toes were jackhammers.

“Lady White!”

He felt as though the hole was taking him incredibly deep down.

It was so deep that there was no way an ordinary person could survive such a fall.

Soon he no longer needed to kick the stone walls to slow his descent because he felt as though his body was becoming weightless for some reason.

Then Kai found himself at the bottom of the hole, in an open space much larger than he would ever have imagined. House Balta’s mausoleum was large, but it didn’t compare to this.

He could faintly see something round at the bottom of the space. He thought that the vastness of it all might be confusing his senses, but he eventually accepted that what he was looking at was a massive skull.

His feet touched down on the ground. The moment he landed, someone grabbed him from behind. He could tell from the sound of her voice and the smell of perfume that this was Lady White.

“Kai...”

“My Lady...”

The beautiful lady called his name and clung to him, but he had to focus his attention elsewhere.

Looking around, he saw that everyone who’d fallen down the hole was on their feet and they were all unharmed.

Kai saw the ground they were standing on was covered in human bones just like dead twigs covering the floor in the forest. The ground sloped downwards toward the center of the space in the shape of a bowl, descending even deeper into the ground. There was a strange cry that caused deep reverberations through the air around them, and Kai’s survival instincts told him to stay away

from the source of the sound.

“No one said anything about this.”

Ashna’s whole body was trembling. He must have mistaken Kai for one of his servants because he was childishly insisting that Kai quickly do something to get him out of this situation.

“What is that thing?” asked another female voice.

Kai realized that it was the voice of the lady from the center, but he didn’t turn to face her.

From the tone of her voice alone, Kai knew what she had spotted.

She was looking at the massive bones of some creature deep within the darkness.

They could only see a portion of the skull, but they could tell that it was orders of magnitude bigger than anything they were familiar with.

Then, from the bottom of the dark bowl, something began to emerge.

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Now Kai understood what was happening. He understood what this thing was.

A god from the outside.

Then he realized that this unnatural thing trying to climb up was similar to what he had seen several days earlier.

A diabo... He recognized the embodiment of a god from the outside.

Its very existence was loathed by the world itself; it was a black mass of flesh that burned like blue embers for as long as it existed.

Faint blue light lit the underground space, like ghostly flames spreading across a burning field.

I have to do something...

Lady White was still clinging to him and had stiffened with fear.

Kai quickly surveyed his surroundings and searched for some position that would help him defend the women at his back. Then he noticed that if they were to follow the sloped ground to the highest point near to the hole that they had all fallen in from, there was a wall that someone had once tried digging into.

It was evidence of another human sacrifice who'd frantically searched for a way to escape. The thought of that person crying and begging for their life before meeting their unfortunate end gave Kai goosebumps.

At any rate, the wall at that point had to be softer than it looked. The walls had been lined with stone along the length of the pitfall, but this underground space wasn't man-made. It had a smooth surface with very little unevenness that made it look like the inside of a large ceramic pot.

Blue light drove away the darkness of the underground.

They couldn't see anything beyond the base of the bowl. The unnerving skull in the center of that deep darkness looked awfully human. More than half of it was shrouded by the darkness, so they couldn't see its full form. The difference in scale was so vast that if this unreal-looking thing had ever been a living creature, it must have been a giant with a body 100 yules tall.

We're under Baalitoliga's grave. Then that thing must be...

If it had bones, then it must have once lived.

The flesh and organs had rotted away leaving only the bones behind, as was the inescapable fate of all humans who lived in this world. If this was the true form of a land god, then they had once walked the surface in their own bodies as rulers of this world.

Some deep-rooted instinct made Kai shudder as he took Lady White by the hand and ran with her to the wall. As Kai remained silent, Lady White called his name repeatedly in confusion, but Kai had to concentrate on what he needed to do.

He drove a hand into the wall. Using his strength as a guardian bearer, he wrenched at it with his fingers and tried to pull free a clump of dirt that he was holding. It was enough to create a sizable hole, and Kai silently continued to dig.

Lady White must have realized Kai's intention because she began to cooperate with his attempts to dig while allowing her kumadori to show on her face. Surprisingly, the lady from the center was quite calm and collected. She rolled up the sleeves of her formal robes and began shifting the dirt out of their way.

"We can dig our way back up?! Good idea!"

Ashna had run toward them in fear of the dreadful creature. He stood beside them and watched them work, seemingly full of hope. It should have been obvious that they would never be capable of such an incredible feat. When Ashna suggested this childish idea, it made Kai think that the man might genuinely be stupid.

Once they had dug into a certain depth, Kai told Lady White to go inside. The noble lady from the center showed herself to be surprisingly sharp when a single look from Kai was enough to tell her what to do.

Ashna stared at Kai dumbfounded now that Kai had stopped digging. Then, as if he felt the danger he was in, he tried to push the two ladies aside so that he could get deepest into the hole.

Kai made sure that the three of them were safely behind him and then breathed a short sigh. He steadied his breathing and felt himself becoming calm once more.

This is the enshrinement Nevin mentioned.

The gods that Nevin had brought down from the outside had been captured by the magic device within the castle, allowing considerable power to be stolen by Baalitoliga. Kai knew from the way that Count Balta had shone like a diabo that the device had efficiently stripped power from the gods.

That power had probably been consumed by the main body of Baalitoliga.

When he remembered the feeling of eating a guardian bearer's godstone, the principle wasn't so hard to understand. Kai had experienced the feeling of having the soul of a god escape from within his stomach. In that case, this group of diabos that were probably incarnations of gods from outside had probably just had their power stolen and were now reduced to pitiful creatures.

Just stealing their power would bring on their wrath. The offer of a human sacrifice was necessary to quell their anger. This was part of the enshrinement process.

These things should be pretty weak in that case.

If Kai sent the diabolos back wounded, would Count Balta still have to face their wrath? If so, then let him be cursed. He had brought it on himself.

The creature crawling up out of the darkness was most likely an accumulation of underground life-forms. It was unclear how the ecosystem could work for the underground organisms who spent their lives down here where no light could reach, but now they moved according to the will of the diabolos, thus serving as its vessel.

The body of the misshapen and horrifying thing was undulating wildly as it approached the four delicious-looking offerings it had been given.

The way the world tried to expel gods from outside that it could not tolerate was to burn their poorly defined bodies, and the foul stench that spread from them was so offensive that it seemed ill-suited to the beautiful blue light given out in the process. In front of the hole containing Lady White and the others, Kai stood at the ready while recalling his previous experience in battle against a diabolos.

First, I need to be able to resist it.

Kai spoke to the god of the valley who sat on the perch within himself.

He asked for skin that wouldn't be susceptible to the curse of the diabolos.

The surface of his body began to stiffen, and he knew that he had been transformed so that he could take a hit from the diabolos.

He knew how to deal with diabolos, and the calmness that knowledge provided was important in itself. Just being able to suppress the diabolos's special ability to damage one's soul was enough to turn this into a world where battles can be fought through brainless use of muscle.

Kai was caught off guard when a tentacle came flying toward him like a whip in an attempt to grab him.

It came at him casually, like someone picking up a fallen nut from the ground, and Kai met it with his elbow without trying to dodge. Kai had to protect Lady White and the others, so standing in the same spot was a high priority.

The tentacle that wrapped around his arm exerted fearsome strength in an attempt to pull Kai in like a piece of food, but Kai resisted against that strength.

The kumadori of the god of the valley that he'd kept hidden until now began to appear on his face. But for all of his strength, Kai was still no heavier than a child. When the misshapen creature tried to lift him up, he came away from the ground so easily that it was like picking up a pebble.

Kai's hardened toes forced their way into the hardened ground beneath his feet so that he could fix himself in place. But it seemed as though even the ground would be lifted up. If all of the blue light that filled his vision was just this one creature, then the difference in mass made it a given that Kai would lose any game of tug-of-war.

His only option was to cut it before it could lift him up.

Kai heard an impressed grunt from behind him as he used a single movement to cut through the tentacle with his bare hand. The tip of the tentacle that was still wrapped around his arm continued moving even after being severed. Kai used his strength to tear it away from him and tried to throw it away, but wrapped itself around him once more so that he couldn't get away from it.

It was an annoyance.

Burn up.

This was no time to be hiding his powers.

Fire magic was emitted from Kai's entire arm, and he shook the tentacle loose when he noticed it stiffen for a moment. Just like in battles between guardian bearers, he knew it would be foolish to rely too heavily on his fire magic. The world was already burning away the forbidden body of the diabo with blue embers, so it was likely to have considerable resistance to fire already.

The cross section of the tentacle had a different composition from the tough skin once it was cut away from the main body. The black interior substance must have been burned by Kai's fire because it pulsated violently while giving

out smoke.

The flesh may have been similar to the proteins extracted from underground organisms, which themselves were similar to a mollusk such as a squid or octopus. Although Kai had never seen nor heard of such creatures, he carried knowledge of them within himself.

The inside of the diabo burns...

“Don’t touch it!” Kai yelled a warning to those behind him when someone tried to touch the tentacle.

“...!”

They must have been disgusted by the chunk of flesh that continued to squirm close to the hole. The lady from the center had been about to push it away with the tip of her toes, but now she froze in shock.

“Touch that thing, and it’ll draw out your soul and you’ll die.”

“...”

“That goes for guardian bearers too.”

Kai felt as though they were all looking at his back and wondering, “So how come you can touch it?”

He explained, “It’s sort of like an art. It’s a power I’m using.”

Where Kai’s clothing had come into contact with the embers of the diabo, it had been burned black even though he had immediately beat the flames with his hands to extinguish them. Kai’s body appeared to be unharmed, but white smoke was coming from his fingers and the inside of his arm that had touched the diabo. His skin had gained resistance to the diabo’s curse, and he was also unaffected by the high temperatures of the embers.

But there was no time for him to worry about his appearance.

The diabo had realized that Kai was capable of fighting back, so now it came at him with considerable malice.

“Keep digging!” Kai cried while repeatedly dodging the tentacles. “Get deeper inside!”

The dirt within the wall may have been hard, but the tough fingernails of guardian bearers could scrape through it without trouble. To make sure that no attacks could slip by him and touch them, Kai needed them hidden deep inside. That would give him freedom to move.

The dirt they had dug away was beginning to form a pile. Lady White realized this and then began shouting at Ashna, who was merely watching them dig. She made him move dirt.

Lady White and the lady from the center were covered in so much dirt that both of their formal outfits were now ruined.

Although they'd started digging without any planning, the hole that they'd dug was turning into a better refuge than Kai had expected. Such miracles were possible when several guardian bearers worked together.

"Kai! Come on! Get in!"

He heard Lady White calling to him.

Even when her life was in danger, she was kindhearted enough to worry about Kai, who was no more than a servant to her.

The diabo knew that its prey was buried within the hole. It meant that it wouldn't lose interest in the place where they were all hidden. Kai's only response to Lady White's demands was to raise a single hand in a gesture of refusal.

Then he clenched his fists and got ready to meet the blue light that was coming toward him.

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Magic in this world makes the practitioner's wishes become reality.

Kai released the limiter placed on the blessings given to him by the god of the valley.

He felt warmth in his godstone where the great god of the valley resided.

The huge amount of spiritual energy that soon flowed out rushed to every

part of his body like a hurricane being unleashed. He was filled with so much power that he felt that any wish, no matter how absurd, might become reality, but Kai calmly tried to quantify the amount of energy he could output. Many people in this world would look at a river and simply think that it contained a lot of water, but within Kai was some other self that knew how to define the water in the river in terms of tons per second.

Clearly, there was an upper limit to his output based on the blessings that the god of the valley gave to him, so rather than being overcome with a feeling of absolute power, Kai thought about what fuel he had for converting to magic and considered the best way to put it into use.

Magic uses up too much fuel. I need to experiment to find something that works.

He remembered the scornful laugh of the armored soldier.

But the Kai that had naive thoughts about always being able to trust in magic no longer existed.

Humans called it the arts, while some demi-humans referred to the use of spiritual energy as curses. Kai himself interpreted the mysterious phenomena powered by his spirit as magic. The great warrior had said it was merely a form of a trick that would produce barely an advantage in battle because of the flexibility of a god's blessings. That way of thinking was half right, but also a little wrong. That great warrior had lost its life when faced with the magic sword that Kai created, so Kai knew that there were techniques that would be effective if used properly.

If I've judged right, there are three gods down here... But it's like they've combined together. This looks tough.

It meant that Kai couldn't afford to be indecisive. He was estimating how much magic he would have to use to defeat them.

As the giant diabo rose up from the bottom of the bowl, Kai alone was there to hold it back. If it would be effective, he would use magic and every other form of power that might help him in this situation.

What about... earth magic?

A wave of blue embers began to fill his vision. There seemed no limit to how big the terrifying creature could grow, making every hair on Kai's body stand on end as countless tentacles were thrust toward him. He knocked away and cut through as many as he had time for. The diabo probably didn't feel even the slightest bit of pain and didn't fear having parts of itself cut away. Kai had let his guard down while cutting through tentacles, and the diabo used the opportunity to grab all four of his limbs.

As Kai struggled with all of his might against the incredible power pulling him in, several other tentacles passed by his side. They were, of course, heading to feed on the prey hidden within the hole.

As expected, it wasn't enough to fight with his hands.

He needed magic.

Behind him, there was a well-placed wall made from the dirt they'd dug out, and the diabo couldn't immediately strike at Lady White and the others who had hidden in the darkness behind it. Most of the tentacles fruitlessly struck against dirt and then withdrew.

However, one tentacle found a way through and began moving deeper inside. They must have heeded Kai's warning because they avoided directly touching the tentacle while trying to attack it with stones thrown through a gap in the wall. They must have landed a hit on some sort of sensory organ because the tentacle recoiled and quickly withdrew. Several more stones flew towards it rolling along the floor as it moved back.

An attack by a single tentacle had been enough to place all three of them in danger. While playing tug-of-war for his life with the tentacles, Kai felt the need to try something else.

I need to seal the hole...

Kai tried to create earth magic by imagining the hole behind him being changed.

He formed mental images based on everything he knew about dirt and then tried spending his spiritual energy on making those images reality.

Dirt was made of minute minerals, water, and microbial life.

He thought of the dirt in fields in the village when they were plowed.

If dirt was worked with the hand, it could become like clay, and vibrations could cause it to move like a liquid. If melted down, it could form rocks, and sometimes a deposition process could be used to extract minute amounts of metals. The stuff that looked like dirt must have taken countless different forms. Thinking of it all as simply dirt left one blind to the multitude of possibilities.

Kai did not expect what happened next. A change had already started, but it was starting in the ground directly below his feet.

Not here...!

Ripples were spreading out through the dirt centered around Kai's feet. It was becoming a soft substance like dirt that had been plowed. His feet had been wedged in place, but now they were coming loose, filling Kai with this sudden sense of dread.

Somewhat instinctively, he unleashed fire magic and allowed flames to erupt from every part of his body without worrying whether they would burn his clothes, which caused the grip of the tentacles to loosen slightly. Kai just barely avoided losing the game of tug-of-war, but more tentacles were wrapping themselves around him, leaving him unable to move. Unless he could move from that spot, Kai would have to stay there like an unchanging scarecrow.

Kai tried using his earth magic in another form.

Harden!

The soft ground beneath his feet became hard ground.

He changed the composition of the area around his feet so that he'd be able to hold fast. Now several tons of rock at his feet were taking part in the battle of tug-of-war between Kai and the diabo. The difference in weight was no longer so great that Kai could be overcome.

But every inch of his body was wrapped in tentacles, making it hard to breathe. Kai began to rethink his failed attempt at earth magic.

It seemed as though his earth magic would only work on the soil he was

touching rather than being guided by his senses. He quickly considered alternative uses for this form of magic.

If it was difficult to use without touching things, then could he make his inactive spiritual energy flow directly to another place? What Kai thought about was the secret technique used by the truthseeker that had made an eyeball formed from spiritual energy fly freely outside of his body. Perhaps that could allow his power to reach land some distance away while connected by a wire, like an umbilical cord.

Kai made sure that he could feel the flow of spiritual energy within himself, the flow of heat emitted from his godstone, reaching down to his feet. Then he imagined this flow of spiritual energy that stopped within his own body extending through the ground like tentacles of the diabo. He felt that his understanding and his control over the nearby earth was becoming stronger.

His spiritual energy would dissipate quickly now that it was outside of his body. His spiritual energy was draining rapidly as if spilling from a cracked pot. Operating magic at a distance would have been an impossible task if it hadn't been for the abundance of spiritual energy that the god of the valley provided to him.

Looks like Lady White has dug pretty deep already...

He knew that the hole that the three had dug to escape was much deeper now than it had been at first. In the worst-case scenario, the three would be able to survive until they ran out of oxygen.

Kai sensed the entrance to the hole just as he was reaching his limit. The tentacles were tightening around him and he wouldn't be able to breathe for much longer.

As he began to feel impatient, he struck blindly with the spiritual energy that he had spread out across the opening to the hole. For a moment, he thought he'd failed, but then the opening began to rumble and then collapse.

He had achieved his objective, even though his earth magic had unintentionally caused a cave-in.

He heard screams from within the hole, but there were two guardian bearers

in there and they would be able to find some solution using their own strength.

At any rate, this meant that the three offerings of food had disappeared from the diabo's sight.

Kai took a sharp breath and then tensed up his throat while releasing the earth magic holding his feet in place. There was no longer any reason for him to remain in the same position, so this was an obvious course of action.

Having lost the weight holding him down, Kai's body was easily lifted up by the tentacles. Kai was carried straight towards the mouth of the diabo, but he had used his full strength as a guardian bearer while lifted into the air, freed both of his arms by forming his invisible sword at his wrists, and had quickly cut away the other tentacles.

Kai's body was sent flying away from the elevated position of the hole toward the bottom of the bowl in an instant. He landed on the huge, blue, burning body of the diabo.

Kill it!

Everything below his feet was part of the diabo's body.

The soft body of the diabo accepted Kai's weight and then became one great mouth that would draw him in. Waves like a viscous fluid approached from both sides as it attempted to ensnare its prey.

The two great waves were like jaws approaching Kai from either side, but his invisible sword cut them away in an instant. He then escaped while kicking away the pieces of flesh that he had cut from the diabo.

Kill the diabo!

The god of the valley made demands as if venting its frustration.

Until then, the diabo must have seen Kai as a powerless piece of food that had already been caught. It extended several tentacles toward Kai as if testing them and its whole body began to twitch as if fascinated by Kai's ability to parry each one.

Much like the diabo that he had fought in the palace of the macaques, it reacted like a happy child playing with a small insect. Even when its tentacles

were severed, ripples passed through its skin like laughter as if it felt no pain.

Kai was surprised to find that the skull of Baalitoliga was not so far away. These remains of a god, sacred remains perhaps, had largely crumbled away, but Kai could see distant footprints and small structures here and there, which suggested some fearless soul had once explored here. These may have been traces left by successive generations of House Balta as they secretly explored this underground space.

Kai was flipped upside down.

The diabo had grabbed his leg and thrown him into the air as if toying with him.

Deep within the spinning darkness that surrounded him he saw small white creatures moving. Their bodies were white enough to make them visible through the darkness. They were limbless grubs, similar to those that could be found under the bark of any rotten tree in the borderlands.

These squirming creatures were adhered to every part of the walls of the underground grave of Baalitoliga. The creatures must have provided the substance that the diabo had used to create a vessel for itself.

The surviving members of these creatures were moving in a strange way.

They were producing silk to create cocoons for themselves. For the white grubs, it was just another day in the unnerving underground space that was their home.

Although many of them must have been devoured by the diabo, the swarm of grubs continued to crawl fearlessly through the underground space while the silk they created was turning the dark floor white.

Kai beat back an approaching tentacle.

He'd lost all sense of which way was up and which way was down.

Kai fell down and landed somewhere that was rich with the rotten stench of the diabo and the smoke from the embers that burned its body. The diabo must have been heading upward because it was no longer close to the white grubs.

My brethren are hatching.

Kai felt as though he heard Nevin's voice.

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His kind would soon emerge and take flight.

Hundreds of white cocoons had been made on the floor of the underground world that the diabo was leaving behind. Kai remembered how Nevin had seemed more like an insect than a bird, and he more or less understood that other members of Nevin's species were underground in metamorphosis.

This may have been another part of the enshrinement process. It seemed odd that an enshrinement developed by humans should involve insect people that were not even similar to humans.

But that wasn't the only mystery.

How do these people expect to handle the diabo they've made?

They had brought down gods from outside to steal their power. That much he understood.

But these gods that had been lured in and stripped of their power had taken forms that would bring calamity to the world ruled over by those same thieves. What remained of those gods was this diabo.

It would crawl up from the bottom of the land god's grave where it was created, and it would be filled with malice. Ultimately, someone would need to slay the creature.

There had to be someone prepared to fight with it.

I guess it's pretty obvious who that is...

Above the grave of Baalitoliga, guardian bearers from across the borderlands were gathered at that very moment.

And that wasn't all.

One of those human warriors was just given some unbelievable blessings, wasn't he?

When Baalitoliga stole power from the gods from outside, there was a human

who received blessings in the enshrinement process.

Needless to say, this person was the warden of the borderlands, Count Balta, who served as Baalitoliga's host vessel. When terrible calamity threatened the land above, this lone warrior would risk his life to prevent it.

In addition to the numerous other issues with the plan, it would end with a diabo appearing and threatening to bring about a calamity that would cause the world to rot. When a hero stepped up to defeat the newborn diabo, the lords of the borderlands, who valued strength above all else, would celebrate their hero. Their sympathy for House Moloch, whose daughter had been tricked into becoming a human sacrifice, would be forgotten. Based on his power alone, Count Balta would be seen as a man of virtue who protected his people from external enemies.

The word "scammer" came to Kai's mind, but he soon forgot it without quite understanding what it meant.

Anyhow, I'd better do what I can.

If there were three gods from outside here, then the body of the diabo they'd created would contain three godstones. He had to somehow capture those godstones and break them open like before, which would overturn the principles that allowed the diabo to exist in this world, its flesh would turn inside out, and it would disappear.

He dodged tentacles that flew at him while stabbing with his sword here and there.

The diabo felt no pain of course, and it seemed to be enjoying playing with Kai. It saw this fight as a mere game because it believed itself to be far more powerful than Kai.

Kai tried frantically to put up a fight, but a diabo with limitless tentacles could cause an endless amount of problems, and its inhuman strength was gradually wearing down Kai's mental fortitude with each strike.

To make matters worse, the main body was continuously advancing and Kai's footing was growing increasingly worse. The sloped ground of the underground space became vertical beyond a certain point, and the walls even began to

slope inward nearer to the ceiling.

Kai had thought that the hole he'd fallen through would be their exit, but the diabo didn't even look at that opening. As if guided by some trick of the magic that was in effect, it headed for the wider space above its head instead. Needless to say, the body of the diabo was not a reliable place to stand as the slope grew steeper.

Kai was dodging the crazed attacks from the diabo more or less on instinct as he quickly decided on a course of action.

He drew the knife at his waist and stabbed it into the diabo while holding it with an underhand grip. The skin of the diabo was so hard that almost nothing besides the invisible sword could penetrate it easily, but it wasn't harder than iron.

While hanging from the knife in the diabo that he gripped with one hand, he spent the spiritual energy that he'd gathered in his other hand on a particular form of magic. His hand struck the butt of the knife, sending the spiritual energy into the diabo.

How do you like this?!

It was unclear how the soft structures of the diabo's body operated. A diabo was able to incorporate life-forms of this world into itself, but it probably had no original body of its own. The cross section of its burning flesh had reacted like protein a short while earlier.

Based on that brief observation, it seemed likely that this mysterious body worked in a way that was more or less an imitation of creatures from this world.

What Kai had sent into its body was an extremely high voltage.

The brief bolt of lightning that he gave out was absorbed by the butt of the knife, and with a noise like someone striking a pot, it created a shockwave that caused Kai to close his eyes.

The moment it felt the shock, the body of the diabo raised up and shuddered. Not even Kai himself knew just how much of an electric shock he'd given it, but he knew that even a small battery was a power source capable of rendering a human immobile. A shock powered by a guardian bearer's spiritual energy was

perhaps several times more intense, or was perhaps increased by a factor of several tens.

Did that... work...? Haha.

The result was impressive.

An area with a radius of approximately 20 yules centered on Kai, which was a quarter of the diabo's massive body, was now completely immobile.

The diabo must have been confused to find part of its body suddenly deactivated. Even the working parts of its body came to a stop as its edges raised up and rippled like a slug. The divine power that had been resisting against the world's efforts to destroy it must have been weakened by the paralysis because the blue embers burning the inactive areas suddenly became more intense. Kai was hit with a wave of heat and a foul stench as he tried to concentrate on what he could "see."

Godstones were hidden somewhere within the body of this diabo. Although the intensity of the blue fire burning the diabo increased, such optical phenomena was not visible in the world of auras. In fact, the aura of the paralyzed portions was shining much less brightly, highlighting the area where all activity had ceased.

The divine energy that had been covering the diabo and overflowing from its body was weakening, making it easy to spot one of the godstones forming the core hidden within.

Found you.

Kai let go of the knife that he'd used to support himself and ran several steps along the minimal footing provided by the steeply inclined diabo. It was almost like running along a wall. Finally, he leaped and stabbed with a powerful version of his invisible sword, aiming at the source of the light. After thrusting with the sword, he continued to move the sword around while pouring more magic into it for as long as his energy reserves would allow.

He knew that he'd landed a decisive blow when he heard a screech from the diabo that seemed to shake the very ground. The strange flesh of the creature began to collapse like a whirlpool being drawn towards a single point as its

existence weakened. It was like watching wastewater flow into a drain.

Kai realized that the surface he'd been standing on was now crumbling, so he hurried to grab hold of one of the diabo's remaining tentacles.

Part of the diabo's body that had suddenly been sucked into that single point then burst apart, as if it had been constricted beyond what it could withstand, scattering a large volume of foul substances. Its body turned inside out and the material that it had gathered from this world sprayed outward.

As masses of dead bugs sprayed from the diabo, a quarter of its huge body was rapidly vanishing, leaving what remained of its body almost torn in two.

All right, I can do this.

Kai licked his lips as he wiped away sweat.

He tasted something sour which he imagined to be the raw materials used to create the diabo. It made him laugh as if he was losing his mind.

The two sides of the torn-apart diabo recognized Kai as an enemy and stopped climbing so they could focus on attacking him. Part of the diabo's massive body peeled away from the wall to deliberately fall down toward him. Kai instinctively reached for the knife at his waist, but he realized that he'd just lost the knife.

Kill it.

Now that he had a means of dealing with it, the diabo didn't scare him so much. He smiled wryly in response to the god of the valley's excitement and then he straddled the base of the tentacle so he could ride on it. The movement of the tentacles near the paralyzed location was slow.

He had no knife, so he would have to plunge his bare hands into it.

He gauged the size of the diabo coming towards him as he thrust his hand outward and leaped toward it. A small invisible sword had appeared on his hand and penetrated the skin of the diabo with no trouble.

He shuddered in response to the indescribable sensation he felt, but he unleashed electricity without a moment's hesitation. If he'd imagined a vague concept of electricity, he would have simply generated ordinary electricity; the

trick was to imagine his spiritual energy being concentrated into a voltage.

There was a muffled sizzling sound.

The part of the diabo that had been headed right for Kai was unable to do anything despite being so near to him. Instead, it simply fell straight down. The remaining part of its torso that was still attached to the wall was also peeled away and dragged down to the bottom of the bowl.

The task had now been reduced to routine work. Kai decided he would take care of the half of the diabo that remained on the wall first, then he'd go down to take care of the part that had fallen.

Kai shook the strange goo from his hand while watching the slow movements of the half-paralyzed body that remained.

He breathed slowly and made himself calm before readying his hand.

He prepared himself to swing his hand downwards.

"The hell are you doing?!"

Kai's mind went blank as he was suddenly knocked off his feet.

Kai was knocked unconscious and sent falling from the base of the tentacle that he'd been straddling. He fell headfirst down the slope and then rolled several times. The only thing that stopped him from continuing to fall was that the slope of the bowl became gentler halfway down. If he had been falling with more momentum, he'd have continued down to the very bottom.

Kai's toughness as a guardian bearer meant that he soon regained consciousness. He looked up at the white insect boy, who fluttered his wings while displaying his anger through clenched fists.

"Get in my way and I'll beat the shit out of you," had been his warning.

It was possible that he was there to kill Kai.

Kai felt a slight warmth on his face, and when he raised his hand to touch it, he felt the blood stuck to his skin. A single punch had been enough to break Kai's skin when the god of the valley's blessings should have protected him.

Kai felt his anger building as he punched the side of the bowl in frustration.

“Didn’t I tell you I’d beat the shit out of you?”

“Try it. I’ll give it back as good as I get.”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

His opponent was a fellow protector.

Both had their own selfish aims, and all that was left was for them to compare their strength.

Kai spat and readied himself so that they could settle differences in the way that was most natural for guardian bearers.

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Protector Nevin.

Kai could guess where the name Nevin of the Blizzard came from.

Nevin’s wings were as beautiful as the wings of a butterfly, but there was something very strange about the way he used them to deliver midair punches.

An ordinary butterfly would be so light that it would move together with the wind and would simply float on the air currents, but Nevin moved with such speed and agility that even someone with Kai’s eyes struggled to keep track. His attacks would then come unexpectedly from outside of his opponent’s field of view. The force that Nevin’s fists carried was so great that it was hard to believe that he was attacking from midair with no ground beneath his feet. If a human was in midair, no matter what sort of attack they used, it wouldn’t be able to cause a strong impact if there was nothing to absorb the reaction force. Ordinary physics didn’t seem to apply to Nevin.

This has to be magic.

Nevin could use magic to optically conceal his form. He also had an abundance of spiritual energy like a guardian bearer receiving blessings from a great god with high divinity. It was easy to see why he’d want to find uses for it.

Those who were born to a species weaker than those around them, and who

were driven by a need to overcome strong opponents, would naturally search for special uses, such as magic, for their spiritual energy, just as Kai had.

Humans were weak, but Nevin had been born as an even weaker, butterfly-like creature, giving him all the more reason to search for something that might give him an advantage over others.

Each time Nevin moved, there was a sound like a gust of wind. His appearance would lead others to underestimate him, but his movements were more like those of a bee than a butterfly. He also appeared well versed in martial arts because he could use one hand to skillfully break through Kai's defenses before striking him, and he accurately delivered the damage to the weak parts of Kai's joints.

As Kai did what he could to put up a defense, a rush of attacks came at him from outside of his vision.

Although these attacks were mostly supported by magic, Kai accepted it as a rule that their attacks should be limited to physical blows. As small as he was, Nevin's fighting style felt like the characteristic style of the borderlands.

Kai didn't use potentially fatal magic like his invisible sword, and instead fought back using his body like he had during the ritual contests.

He took several hard blows from the left and right, but he kept swinging his fists. He used his footwork to move in a circle as attacks came at him from the left and right, and then he suddenly lunged forward in an attempt to grab Nevin's leg as it came toward him. Nevin reacted to this by turning a somersault in the air and then delivering a roundhouse kick. Kai's outstretched right hand was knocked away by the quick downward kick from Nevin, and Kai suddenly saw a white spray before his eyes as his upper body lunged at nothing but air.

This was an attack unique to Nevin's species. "No fair!" Kai yelled as he realized that a shower of scales was blinding him. Nevin just laughed mockingly at him in response.

"Unfair? Are you stupid?"

"I'll show you!"

The stinging sensation in Kai's eyes was quickly washed away by water magic

that flowed from his palm. Then, with a flick of his arm, he turned the water he had produced into mist. It worked like a smokescreen.

In his confusion, Nevin's childlike legs were left vulnerable. Kai gripped the slim ankle of one of those legs and then slammed Nevin against the diabo, which was still moving sluggishly. It should have been a critical hit, but the feeling in his hand was strange. Nevin's body bounced back as if he'd been hit against a cushion. Then Nevin's other leg, which Kai wasn't holding on to, came swiping at him as if Nevin was completely unhurt. Kai saw it coming and tried to dodge, but he was still knocked off his feet as it hit the side of his head. His head shook violently as he dropped to the ground like a rotten tree.

He was only unconscious for a moment. The moment he hit the ground, he woke up and rolled as he got back on his feet. This quick action saved him from a potentially fatal attack from Nevin.

The strange cushion-like feeling must have also been magic.

The way Nevin moved through the air shouldn't have been possible at all with his large, soft wings. He didn't even flap them like ordinary wings. It was more like they were sails catching strong gusts of wind.

"Wind magic, is it?"

"It's the most basic form of curses my kind use."

His sudden maneuvers in midair and his ability to attack without a firm place to stand seemed to both be effects of his magic. The principles behind it were probably similar to the earth magic that Kai had just tried using.

Nevin may have been continuously controlling a fixed amount of space behind him using wind magic. Each time he manipulated the air, invisible air currents contributed to his movement in the most effective way possible.

Sword magic aside, magic seemed to be allowed in this fight.

Nevin must have realized that the aura coming from Kai was growing because he kept his distance while watching Kai's movements and being wary of any changes in his own surroundings.

Kai worried that Nevin might be looking around for the place where Lady

White and the other offerings were hidden, which was a point of vulnerability for Kai. However, Nevin began to look troubled when he saw that one diabo was starting to move as it recovered from the paralysis and the other diabo was already climbing up out of the bowl again.

“No, it’s too soon.”

Kai had also heard the sounds that were coming from the bottom of the bowl.

They came from the diabo that had fallen to the bottom and was now squirming around in an attempt to climb back up, and from the white cocoons that filled every inch of the wall.

With every movement, the diabo crushed cocoons, causing the fluids of the creatures inside to spray out before they could hatch. The larvae that were still moving around must have gotten the diabo’s attention because it began to eat them as it moved along. After the creatures had been devoured here and there, another nightmarish scene played out.

Those that had formed their cocoons first were hurrying to hatch and break free.

“Not yet. Wait for the exit to open.” Nevin’s eyes were wide with shock.

Near his hovering feet, the other diabo had finished resting and was now starting to climb again. The diabos must have sensed powerful enemies that were capable of killing them because they kept their distance from Kai and Nevin as they climbed upward.

The exit Nevin spoke of must have been what they were headed for.

Kai looked up at the ceiling of this underground world, and he saw faint traces of where it looked like there’d once been an opening. The hole had been closed off with large rocks, and a neat layer of bricks had been put in place to cover any gaps, as if someone had once sealed this place.

The power of a diabo would easily be enough to reduce those large rocks to a rain of crumbling rubble. If the bottom of the seal was broken, the bricks laid above would simply rain down to the bottom. That would create the exit that Nevin spoke of.

Kai realized that Nevin had moved away.

He'd gone to protect his kind from the diabos as they moved destructively through the underground space.

His white form was stopped by a swarm of the white butterflies that were appearing underground in great numbers. As the butterflies fluttered their wings, they headed upward, passing Nevin by as he tried to descend. Nevin repeatedly shouted to them, "Wait!"

It was clear to anyone watching that they didn't understand Nevin's words. Rather than heed Nevin's warning, the white butterflies headed up toward the ceiling of the underground space. "It's too soon!" Nevin's cries reverberated through the hollow space as he cried like a child.

The diabo furthest up broke open the seal on the ceiling.

First a great boulder acting as a seal above their heads cracked, and then bricks rained down as the whole thing gave way. The diabo drew its head back and held fast amid the falling debris, but the butterflies fluttering around below screeched and dropped to the ground like flowers as they were hit by the falling debris.

The fallen diabo paid no mind to Kai watching from below as it scrambled upward at an alarming speed. It reached the other diabo above and the two merged together once more.

Beautiful wings glistened as they floated down to the ground through a shower of loose scales.

It wasn't just the wings. Torsos of young creatures with just one remaining wing were also falling to the ground. There were squeaking sounds that must have been those creatures crying out. Some of the young creatures landed at Kai's feet as they cried, but these insects around his feet bore no resemblance to Nevin. Kai realized that they were simply small bugs covered in fur, and all of the pity he'd felt for them suddenly vanished.

It was hard for people to empathize with creatures that were so different from themselves. They made him curious, but he didn't quite feel the affection one might feel for a dog or a cat.

Nevin was now staring straight upward.

He was watching and praying for the well-being of the survivors who were still flapping their wings. Only a few of them remained as the exit was finally opened.

“Your kind aren’t exactly people, are they?” Kai said.

Nevin responded to this blunt question without emotion, and without looking at Kai.

“We were people once. A long, long time ago.”

The light of the morning sun was pouring in through the opened hole.

Even that dim light felt strong because the underground space lacked any source of light. The few survivors followed the diabo out through that hole, and the outside light that had glistened through their wings became simple, peaceful rays of sunlight.

“The lulso kept losing their wisdom until they turned into idiots. The gods steal the wisdom of the losers—the old and useless species who’ve lost their purpose. The world has always worked that way.”

“...”

“Declining species soon turn into idiots as each child born is inferior to their parents. My kind got to a point where all of the children were like ordinary bugs. The gods abandoned them because they had no purpose. They didn’t need to be people anymore.”

Kai didn’t understand what Nevin was saying.

He guessed that lulso was the name of the species of insect people that Nevin belonged to.

“I fought to protect my kind. The lulso were one of the yaso, and we fought bravely against the human armies. Even when our nest was sealed underground, we concealed ourselves and focused on surviving so that we might reawaken someday.”

“Nevin.”

“We lost to the humans just once... We accepted them as superiors and abandoned our land so that we could multiply underground. That was probably what we did wrong.”

Nevin looked back at Kai.

Kai looked at this surviving member of an ancient race.

Tears were falling from Nevin’s eyes.

“The livestock you keep for their meat were the same. They were all people once. Proud people that showed us friendship and loyalty. Isn’t it pathetic? Isn’t it tragic?”

The ancient protector couldn’t stop his tears from flowing.

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When he first heard that the sister who was his flesh and blood was about to be wed so suddenly, he initially reacted with cold indifference.

When that same sister suddenly vanished before his eyes, the sound that Olha uttered was barely audible. It was a small, but angry, “Hah?” The same sound that any impatient child might make.

“What’s happening?”

This was supposed to be a proud day for his sister.

Olha’s thoughts began racing, and all of the events that had led to this moment flashed through his mind. He had met with powerful people in the provincial capital while accompanied by his father, and he began to sweat as he remembered how many times they’d exchanged words of courtesy.

They lured my family into their trap.

The inspector who’d stayed in their village, Severo Gandal, had been mysteriously killed in a night raid by demi-humans.

His father had headed to the provincial capital of Baltavia before the blame could fall on them, and while they were investing large sums of money to set plans in motion, some vague discussion of an engagement for Jose had come

up.

The engagement had been discussed casually as if it was no more than another exchange of property, but it was the warden of the borderlands himself who had wished for the marriage to occur, and Olha's father had agreed to the proposal while caught up in the flow of events. House Moloch needed to extinguish the flames that might consume them, and a refusal was not an option.

Jose was no more than the daughter of a minor lord of the borderlands, so it was as though she was marrying into wealth. But their father had grimaced through the entire discussion, and even Olha knew that this match was unlikely to lead to his sister's happiness.

While House Balta held authority over every lord within the borderlands, House Moloch ruled over a trifling territory, and the gap between the two houses was just too great. It was likely that this entirely inappropriate match would make life very difficult for his sister. Both Olha and their father had known this from the start.

But none of that mattered.

The problems had gone far beyond the question of her happiness.

Olha had seen his sister swallowed into the altar of House Balta like a human sacrifice, and he could not get the image out of his mind.

He felt that he might go mad.

"Jose!"

Olha ran, pushing his way through the crowd. Moments later, servants from House Valma also came pouring out of the waiting room in a panic. There was pandemonium, and food and drink prepared for the banquet was knocked to the floor.

The mausoleum where the banquet was being held was filled with a roar of voices. Kumadori appeared on the face of every lord who had stood up, and they all crowded around the altar of Baalitoliga. At the front of the crowd of people was the warden of the borderlands, who was in agony as his servants tried to help him. He was still issuing commands to them one after another, and

the many guards of House Balta came flooding in with weapons in their hands.

The waiting room where Olha had been was closer to the altar than the crowd of guests, which meant that he had been able to reach the bottom of the altar without being hindered. There he saw his father, who was red in the face. His father had probably been one of the first to react, because it was his house affected. However, his mad rush to the altar had been stopped by a redheaded woman a whole head shorter than him who was holding him by the waist. She had been part of the group that he was drinking with and was one of the guardian bearers with close ties to House Balta.

Olha didn't understand why his father, as one of the victims, needed to be held back. He became filled with anger while trying to understand why anyone would stop a father rushing to the aid of his daughter while she was in danger.

Vezin saw an angry-looking Olha approaching. So much blood had gone to Vezin's head that the blood vessels on his forehead were bulging out. But he wanted no help. He simply shook his head and told Olha, "Hurry."

Olha tried to climb onto the altar, but despite being able to get near it, he found it surrounded by people who'd taken up positions to form a human wall, preventing anyone from getting any closer. Those blocking Olha's way included the group of priests.

"Out of my way!"

"Stop!"

"We won't allow you!"

"The gon-no-sōzu forbids it!"

His hand instinctively went to the sash at his waist, but then he remembered that he had come here unarmed. Olha tutted and released his guardian's power before trying to force his way through.

They were all sigiless, so Olha was able to pry a hand away from his clothing, but the strength of priests who spent their lives training in the monastery was not to be scorned at. His legs were swept from under him with such ease that Olha lamented at his own powerlessness while several of them held him down.

His land god Eulgshina from the village of Elg had once been represented by a tres sigil, but his god had since fallen in divinity after being cursed by the macaques. The shape of his kumadori had changed, forcing Olha to acknowledge that his sigil rank had fallen. He'd been forced to accept it back when he had struggled with the test of strength at the entrance to the provincial capital.

He'd accepted the reality on a rational level, but it still frightened him to actually feel how much of the power he'd once wielded had been lost.

Back when he was a tres sigil, he could have easily lifted one or two of these people off the ground with one hand, but now his condition was pitiful. The bitter expression that appeared on his father's face upon seeing his son held down so easily was beyond description. His father's gaze then returned to the altar where Jose had been standing.

Olha had felt some unspoken message in his father's eyes, and now he struggled desperately to break free from the priests. But through their refined martial arts, they understood exactly how the human body could apply force, and they had clever methods for redirecting that force.

His veins were throbbing.

His father had lost all faith in him.

Olha could do nothing but grind his teeth.

At that moment, his father was pinning his hopes on the actions of another. Olha had seen the idiot who'd jumped down to follow his sister.

But he was no more than a hatchling. He hadn't even advanced to the level where he could produce a kumadori. Yet for some reason, his father had expected great things from the boy ever since the battle to defend Lag.

He moved his head to look around, though he was unable to move the rest of his body. The priests holding him down were having a conversation above his head. They didn't seem panicked by the situation, and instead, they were arguing over difficult religious matters. Their argument was stopped by a hooded priest standing in a somewhat higher place while looking down the hole in the altar from its edge.

He gave instructions with a gesture, causing several priests to run off. A small region around the eyes of the high priest was visible within the hood, and his kumadori could be clearly seen.

Gon-no-sōzu.

This was a high priest dispatched by Maas after being invited by House Balta for the sake of presiding over services during the banquet. He was one of the few people there able to stand up to the warden of the borderlands in any shape or form, and he appeared to be using the art of one hundred eyes, just like the truthseeker that had visited Lag sometime earlier. The high priest was peering into the hole in the altar and must have been concentrating on the use of his arts.

The priest that had run off came back carrying a long rope. This was lowered into the hole while the other end was being tied to one of the statues. Olha cried out when he realized that the gon-no-sōzu was about to climb down into the hole. He had no idea what was waiting at the bottom of the hole. He pleaded with the priest many times to let a guardian bearer accompany him.

The gon-no-sōzu glanced over, filling Olha with hope for just a moment, but sadly, the numerous guards were pushed back into a position where they obscured Olha's view before anything could happen. Many of them trod on his body as they moved past him.

The wall of guards had broken apart as they failed to resist against the approaching lords of the borderlands. These guardian bearers approached like a roaring wave.

Priests lost their composure and their hold on Olha loosened. Olha somehow managed to struggle free from under the feet of several people, and then he forced his way through the crowd that blocked his way and desperately tried to clamber onto the altar. What drove him was his desire to prove that he was not powerless.

Finally, he got his upper body onto the five-yule-high altar, and then he heard something very clearly amid the chaos of the mausoleum. This miracle was possible because several people were doing similar things at the same time.

“Count Balta!”

“Our Warden!”

While clinging to the edge of the altar, Olha felt a gust of wind blow by him.

He realized that several people were climbing up beside him. Olha felt his gaze drawn to what was above him. He saw the gon-no-sōzu staring up in astonishment, and beyond the gon-no-sōzu, on a level higher on the altar, one man was standing at the foot of the statue of Baalitoliga.

The man seemed to be drunk on whatever it was that overflowed from his body as he slowly raised both hands into the air.

This person was Count Balta, the warden of the borderlands himself.

His body glowed as if cloaked by a godly aura. His limbs, which should have been like rotten branches at his advanced age, were sparkling as they appeared to swell and broaden. Olha watched as they became covered in steel-like muscles and he became speechless like the many other guardian bearers around him.

The noise in the mausoleum rapidly died down, and Count Balta let out a bellowing laugh. It was a laugh that sounded almost insane, as if Count Balta was losing his mind, and it made Olha shudder to hear it.

“Dear spirits of my ancestors! Bear witness as your descendant reclaims your former glory!”

Olha felt something hit his cheek.

It was hot, and it ran down his face slowly. He realized that it was a drop of the blood erupting from Count Balta’s nose.

“I bring peace and stability to the great borderlands! The power of Balta extends to every corner of the northern lands!”

There was a rumbling of many voices.

It was as if they’d forgotten that his sister had just disappeared. The lords and the soldiers began to cry out Count Balta’s name. Madness swept through the crowd and consumed them in an instant.

The sigil of Count Balta was familiar to Olha because he’d seen his sigil several times on the battlefield.

It was because he knew the sigil that the sigil he saw on the face of Count Balta before him now caused such a great stirring in his heart.

Olha could not remember ever seeing a sigil of such incredible intricacy.

It looked just like...

A crown sigil...

He'd only ever heard of such revered sigils in stories, but he couldn't help but believe he was witnessing one now.

Out of a million humans, there should have only been one guardian bearer in possession of a crown sigil.

"I, Balta, have ascended to the level of the heavens!"

Olha could do no more than continue to stare up at the spectacle.

This was a turning point that would bring about a rapid change across the world.

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There was an unexpected rumbling from the ground.

It was an intense shaking like a roar from the very mountain on which the provincial castle was built, and it completely silenced everyone within the mausoleum. The guardian bearers sensed that something at the epicenter was now crawling up from deep underground. They heard it clambering up somewhere behind the statue that Count Balta was standing in front of while making his declaration. They heard it clearly as it climbed up above the ceiling.

Then it happened again. This time the vibrations were strong enough to make the entire castle sway from side to side.

The rumbling spread out across the main roof of the castle, sending the many coverings on the walls raining down on the guardian bearers. Those guardian bearers knocked these items aside with their bare hands as they moved towards the source of the vibrations. They gulped as they listened closely.

Something terrible had come crawling up from underground and was now

crawling around on the roof. There was an unspoken understanding among them all that this thing could not be ignored lest it bring about a calamity that would threaten the very existence of the human race.

The first one to move was, of course, Count Balta, with his crown sigil on display.

Count Balta exhibited overwhelming power that the people of the borderlands could not help but admire as he ran a short distance down to the altar and leaped over the thick wall formed by the crowd of guardian bearers in a single bound. He then continued on, charging outside like a wild primate. The power in his feet was visible from the way that the massive carpet was flipped back at the point where he landed.

Someone yelled, “Follow Count Balta!” and then the cry spread out like a wave. The guardian bearers began to flood out from the mausoleum with their morale as high as can be. They formed an unstoppable torrent.

As Olha clung to the edge of the altar, the thought of the great enemy they faced caused a stirring of intense emotion, but he knew that his priority should be to rescue his missing sister. He was left feeling torn. For far too long, he was lost in thought. He was pulled out of his reverie when his father, now near his feet, cried, “Go! Quickly!” while climbing onto the altar himself. The unknown female warrior who’d stopped his father must have determined that the orders from her master, Count Balta, were now fulfilled. She bowed to Olha apologetically as she looked toward him. Behind her stood several guardian bearers who appeared to have particularly high levels of divinity. At the redheaded, female warrior’s urging, they all headed outside in pursuit of their absent master. These may have been the lords of the fortress cities of the Holy Northern Crown supporting House Balta.

Olha felt his father urging him forward as he climbed up onto the altar, but the gon-no-sōzu was still blocking his path.

“We are no longer required.”

The gon-no-sōzu had clearly been looking underground using one hundred eyes, but now he moved away from the edge of the hole to clear a path. Olha looked and saw that the rope lowered into the hole was now creaking under

someone's weight. Someone was climbing up from below.

As expected, the person that appeared was the hatchling. The two ladies who had previously vanished then appeared behind him. They had been tied to the hatchling's waist as he carried them up like luggage.

The hatchling had carried the two girls to the top without so much as getting out of breath. As he put them down on the ground, he asked the gon-no-sōzu, "Where is he?"

The gon-no-sōzu guessed who he meant. "He's on the roof at this moment," he told Kai while lowering his hood.

The hatchling briefly straightened his clothes and was about to jump down from the podium the moment his sash was tightened. He was stopped when Olha's sister Jose grabbed his shoulder from behind and the lady of House Valma grabbed the sleeve of the other arm.

Jose gestured toward the large crowd of lords leaving the mausoleum and told Kai, "You can take a break." She sounded like a worried parent talking to their child.

Lady Florence of House Valma told him, "You're staying here with us." Even Olha was sharp enough to realize that this was how the two exhausted ladies were displaying their affection for the hatchling. They'd just escaped from what would normally have been certain death deep underground, so it was easy to imagine that there'd now be shared feelings between them.

The gon-no-sōzu looked as though he was thinking deeply. "What is the creature?" he asked while gesturing towards the roof. Despite being one of the wisest individuals in the country, he was directing his questions at an uneducated child of the borderlands.

Incredibly, the kumadori on the gon-no-sōzu's face was a tres sigil. This priest had been able to reach a level of tres without the blessings of a land god, while Olha had lost that same status.

The hatchling looked at the gon-no-sōzu with just a hint of disdain and then looked away.

Then he mumbled an answer: "A diabo, I think."

It took some time before Olha could process this response. Olha was a guardian bearer, and had therefore been taught about diabos. They were gods of calamity that would spread a curse across the land simply by existing, and they needed to be slain the moment they were discovered.

Regards of where they appeared, when, and in what form, their appearance was generally preceded by a breakdown in the governance of the land. As the next in line to lead House Moloch, this had been taught to Olha as part of his training.

How does he know about diabos?

Diabos would only appear in the human kingdom once every few decades. And when they did appear, they would only be active in a small part of the vast kingdom, so a very limited number of people from each generation would ever lay eyes upon one.

And yet, this hatchling spoke as if he'd actually seen one. An ordinary villager should not have even heard the word "diabo."

"Then the prophecy made by Maas was indeed true."

The gon-no-sōzu wore a sad look on his face as he traced a holy sign in the air. Then he began to ask about what was at the bottom of the hole, and he wanted to know every detail of what had happened. The priest led the hatchling to the corner of the altar as he asked an unending stream of questions.

Olha and his father were now both on the altar, and were both happy to see that Jose had been rescued and was safe. The lady of House Valma also smiled at someone, who was perhaps a member of her family.

"You're in the way. Move."

The altar wasn't particularly wide, and now there were several people standing on it, which left little room for Count Balta's son Ashna to climb up out of the hole. He struck at the feet of several people in his irritation. Unfortunately for him, everyone standing there had been a victim of House Balta, so they showed no concern for him and some deliberately continued to stand in his way for a while. Count Balta's young son was covered with dirt from head to toe when he finally climbed up.

No one was paying him attention, so he moved closer to the two wives he'd been promised and tried to explain himself to them in his high-pitched voice. When they brushed him off, he joined with some of his house's soldiers, almost in tears. His resentful gaze was aimed at the hatchling who'd stolen all the glory from him. Ashna's behavior was enough to make Olha sigh.

Olha felt a strange sort of feeling.

It was as though the hatchling, who was enduring a barrage of questions from the gon-no-sōzu at that point, wasn't the ordinary human he appeared to be.

Olha had no idea what had happened underground. The hatchling must have come face-to-face with a diabo. But there was no way that a sigiless could put up a fight against a diabo. It was unrealistic to think that he'd protected the two ladies offered as human sacrifices.

Jose did not appear to have drawn the same conclusion. Olha saw that she was continuously looking over at the hatchling while talking with their father. It was clear enough that the hatchling had done something to make her feel fondness and reliance towards him.

Women were drawn towards strong men.

The lady of House Valma was no exception. She was ignoring her betrothed completely while she stole glances at the hatchling. Olha had never found it anything other than an annoyance when he gained attention from many women in his village, but this situation made him feel uneasy. It was as though the hatchling had now replaced him as the dominant male, and he was surprised by his own irritation.

He was now nothing more than a doi sigil who'd struggled with the test of strength when entering the city, but he still couldn't accept that this hatchling was able to draw the attention of women to himself when he should have been overshadowed by the many lords of the borderlands who had gathered for the banquet. That was an impossible feat for a doi sigil, let alone a sigiless.

Then there came another rumble that shook the mausoleum.

There was screaming, and the rumbling sounded like something collapsing. Some of the lords of the borderlands who should have been outside were now

tripping over each other in their haste to get back into the mausoleum. They wanted to use the sturdy iron door as a shield. As more lords flooded into the building, many of them were demanding that the door be closed at once.

“It’s beyond all doubt! It’s a diabo.”

“How did we end up in this mess?!”

“Death from a single touch! We’re done for.”

They seemed to become calm once more after expressing their feelings in loud voices, but the looks on their faces suggested that the battle outside was not going well.

They had knowledge of the creature.

The touch of the diabo would rot the very ground.

It meant that it could rot away the power of guardian bearers, which itself was like an incarnation of a land god’s blessings. For Olha, whose level of divinity had fallen as a result of the damage done to his gravesite by demi-humans not long ago, the situation was cause for alarm.

“I didn’t like the look of the strange white thing that was flying around. What was that thing?”

It was then that the hatchling ran outside.

The gon-no-sōzu looked stunned when the hatchling disappeared from his view.

Olha’s father had been looking at the hatchling with some strange expectation a short while ago, and now he seemed taken aback as he watched the hatchling go.

Jose yelled, “Kai!”

She should have known that there was no reason for her to call the hatchling’s name.

“Kai!” The lady of House Valma called his name too.

Olha saw her plump lips mouth the words, “Good luck,” in an inaudible whisper.

The diabo had been unleashed on the surface.

Kai bitterly regretted his failure to dispatch the diabo before this could happen. He felt that he might be the only one there who was capable of slaying it, and that thought set his heart racing.

His breath felt hot.

The pounding in his chest grew faster and faster.

He had to kill the diabo as quickly as possible.

Just the memory of the deep scars a diabo could leave on the world was enough to make Kai willing to risk revealing the blessings of the god of the valley that he'd worked to keep hidden up until that point.

The salamander that appeared in the territory of the macaques had spread a powerful curse that caused a vast stretch of land to rot, and it had turned thousands of macaque soldiers into disfigured corpses. The provincial capital of Baltavia was the largest settlement in the borderlands, and it was every bit as populated as the macaque settlement of Heju. Kai had already seen an example of just how much damage a diabo could do once set loose, so there was no time for delay.

Can a few doi and tres sigils handle it if they band together...?

He found himself coming to a stop while he pondered whether the lords of the borderlands ahead of him would be able to suppress the diabo. He knew they'd struggle. The macaque guardian bearers had been unable to fight with their diabo, so it seemed that humans, as a weaker species, would have just as much trouble.

The skin of a diabo was extremely tough and it wasn't easy to break through its protection using an iron spear. It would require a weapon with a sharp iron point and an incredible level of strength to force that point through the skin.

And then to take its life they would need to strike the perch where the divine spirit of the diabo was hiding within the body—they would have to find and destroy the godstone. If the godstone could be damaged, the body of the diabo

would quite literally turn inside out. Its makeshift body, which already placed a strain on the physical laws of reality, would be forced back into its original form.

He shook with excitement as he remembered how he'd once accomplished this himself.

It has to be me...

The ones capable of dealing deep wounds to the diabo were a handful of high-ranking guardian bearers who Kai had seen in the city. These included lords who were host to land gods from large towns.

He had seen for himself that the ruler of one of the fortified towns had been able to pin down a quart sigil like the baron, and it was possible that the visitors from the center included several powerful guardian bearers.

They had enough people there with sufficient power to defeat it, but Kai didn't want to leave such an important task to others without being sure of their abilities.

Slay the creature!

Kai had begun to run.

He had heard Lady White call out his name. He also knew that the other lady from the center was feeling concern for him as she watched him go. Men were an incredibly simple life-form, and these small things were enough to make Kai feel his power increasing.

The guardian bearers hiding themselves behind the iron door of the mausoleum saw sigiless Kai running towards them and tried to warn him. "Stop!" they cried. "You'll die!" They were trying to warn him that the situation was beyond him, but Kai didn't listen to them, nor did he look back. He ran along the 50 yules of the corridor to the main entrance while forcing his way past the guardian bearers blocking his way. Eventually, he leaped out of the building, where he was bathed in the light of the morning sun.

Hah.

His breath turned to a white cloud in an instant.

The outside air embraced his body and he felt a stiffening of his skin, which

was covered by fine sweat. He saw many guardian bearers crying out and swinging their weapons. Kai was taken aback by the danger they were in, but his excitement grew as he ran around the outside of the courtyard so as to get past the crowd.

He saw the front line of the battle against the diabo.

How could this happen?

Kai was lost for words when he saw the tragedy playing out before him.

The rubble strewn across the ground made the footing poor. It appeared that the diabo had climbed down from the main roof and knocked over one of the towers of the provincial capital while using it as something to hold on to.

It was similar to the courtyard between the third residence and the second residence where the ritual contests had been held the day before. The walls to the left and right were adorned by weathered statues representing the 200 gods of the borderlands. This place had become the diabo's pen.

It was as though this place had once been constructed for the sake of fighting diabos. Kai felt deep down that this guess of his was correct.

The dead were already piling up.

The reason that the lords who had originally flooded out of the long corridor of the first residence were in such dismay was simple. They'd recklessly let themselves get hit by the diabo's attacks.

The diabo could curse things in this world just by touching them. It would rot the ground and wear down the soul of living beings.

The experience gained in battle by their ancestors had not been handed down to the lords of the borderlands. Lords whose blessings were not particularly powerful could hardly be blamed for freezing in terror when they saw the massive losses their side was incurring.

The lords on the front line held fast to their positions; they feared being pushed forward as Kai forced his way through them and out into the courtyard. He grabbed hold of several lords who were lying near his feet and threw them back while shouting, "They're not dead yet! Carry them away!" When they

hesitated to act, Kai explained the treatment that could be given to revive someone whose soul had been damaged by a diabo. “If you don’t get it, call a practitioner!” Kai yelled in a coarse voice when they didn’t understand what he was saying.

Kai was still unsure whether he’d gotten his meaning across as he stepped out onto the battlefield. He calmed his emotions and steadied his breathing.

It looks bad, but at least some of them can fight.

Although a good number of overconfident idiots had gone charging at the diabo while swinging their beloved weapons, the more cautious lords had arranged themselves into formations ready to engage in maneuver warfare. Some of them seemed to understand the negative status effect caused by a diabo because they were loudly demanding that everyone keep a safe distance.

Among the fighters, a bald-headed lord with a quart sigil visible on his face was showing fierce determination as he threw himself into combat with gritted teeth.

Kai watched this unfamiliar lord who was playing a key part in the battle. Unknown to Kai, this was Lord Zepeidra Entess, a quart sigil whose achievements in battle were famous in the western borderlands. His weapon was a war hammer that looked like a chunk of iron with a sharpened tip. With each swing, his weapon was able to sink deep into the tough skin of the diabo.

There were others whose efforts were notable. A lord with a bushy beard swung at the diabo with an axe that resembled a giant meat cleaver. A slim lord in a mask unleashed a flurry of punches that made skilled use of iron hand coverings. These two had earned themselves the nicknames Headhunter and Hornet, but Kai had no way of knowing this.

Just seeing these brave, unfamiliar warriors being able to take on a diabo gave Kai reassurance. Their dependability sent a shiver down his spine.

Kai noted that the lords who were holding back without participating in the battle were cheering the others on. Kai was then surprised when he looked back at the battle and saw someone deflect an incoming tentacle with a bare hand.

“Count Balta!”

“He did it!”

“It’s proof that he bears a crown sigil!”

That very moment that he saw the diabo rear up as fragments of diced tentacle flew into the air. A transformed Count Balta stood there with bulging muscles and a sword held in his hand. His ferocious explosion of activity drew further cheers from the crowd. Kai looked at the complex kumadori that was visible on the count’s face and guessed that this must be the fruit of the enshrinement that Nevin had spoken of. The power stolen from a god from the outside had boosted the ruler of the provincial capital, Count Balta, through several ranks as a guardian bearer.

Although he didn’t appear injured, the count wiped something from his face and shook off his hand.

It was only a small amount, but Kai had seen it. He knew that the count had wiped blood from his nose.

The diabo had recognized the count as the greatest threat it faced and was trying to crush him by targeting him with the majority of its tentacles. However, when every tentacle was repelled, it created a fatal opening. Several powerful-looking guardian bearers had taken positions around the count, and their weapons became Count Balta’s shield as they kept track of every single tentacle.

These were House Balta’s closest allies, known collectively as the Holy Northern Crown. They must have been taught how to slay a diabo because the rulers of the fortress towns moved without flinching as they protected Count Balta.

While they protected their superior, Count Balta unleashed a barrage of strikes powered by brute force.

Even a creature with tough skin like a diabo looked like livestock ready to be butchered in the face of such overwhelming power. The black flesh of the diabo was sliced apart, releasing sprays of an ink-like fluid that left Kai in awe.

It was the epitome of brute force. For someone who could slice the creature

apart with such ease, this strategy for dealing with a diabo appeared quite rational.

But this approach did nothing to diminish the strength of the diabo. Pieces of flesh that were cut away began crawling along the ground to rejoin the main body. As the diabo continued to merge with the lost pieces, it was difficult to say whether the diabo's mass was being worn down at all.

Doesn't he know that he can't kill it unless he hits the godstone?

Slicing away the flesh was all well and good.

But the diabo's vital point was its godstone, and that had to be the ultimate target for anyone fighting with the creature. Kai couldn't help but worry when he saw the count appear satisfied with his mindless cutting.

Then there was a voice that gave criticism from someplace else. The count's attack on the diabo had been incessant, but now he stopped. With nothing else to do, Kai searched for the source of the voice.

Why's he here?

Above his head, the morning sun shone through the small wings of the white creature that came flying toward them. Nevin was watching over the wild celebrations of his brethren without showing much interest in the fight on the ground. His criticisms were only intended to guide his brethren as they left the nest.

Kai had been given the opportunity to witness a species reach its end.

The insects that had long been underground now flew through the air to spread their seed, and they began to mate. Nevin perhaps hoped he could guide his brethren to some new land where they might bear their young and multiply.

But that wish was not to be granted.

When the winged insects reached a certain height in the sky, they ceased to beat their wings as if their work was done.

Nevin flew from place to place scooping up his brethren as they began to fall. Nevin's arms were not long enough for him to carry them all. The white, winged

creatures spilled over and rained down on the provincial castle like large snowflakes.

Nevin realized that he couldn't carry more than a few of his brethren, and a moment later he broke down in tears. Kai couldn't help but look away when Nevin began to sound like a crying child.

Nevin's species appeared to be done for.

The harsh, but undeniable reality hit Kai hard.

One wrong move, and this is humanity's future.

He'd learned another of this world's rules.

The world showed kindness to the ruling species alone. To the defeated, it was merciless.

We humans can't let the gods see us look weak.

His instincts told him it was true.

There was a roar from the crowd.

Kai assumed that the count had done something impressive once again.

Kai bent down to pick up a hat woven from a thick wool—probably something dropped by a defeated lord. With another scrap of cloth that he found, he concealed the area around his mouth.

He didn't think it was enough to fool anyone. But he had no time to fetch his mask, and it would at least allow him to hide his sigil.

He'd show the gods that humans could overcome this powerful foe. Kai reached for a spear that had been left stuck in the body of the diabo and pulled it free without speaking a word.

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Another cheer erupted from the crowd.

Those who'd been swinging their weapons looked up, and those who'd been running came to a stop.

They all looked to the place where Count Balta stood.

There was a roar as they cheered in coarse voices all at once.

As if they'd become enraged by the diabo's relentless attacks, the lords of the fortress towns who'd been holding positions around Count Balta now charged forward and began to hack away at the tentacles themselves.

When the count fell behind them, he raised up his weapon—a greatsword—and drew it back so he could swing it with his entire body. His stance as he swung his heavy weapon with all of his might behind it was a familiar one, and the lords around him held their breath as they braced themselves for what they knew was about to happen.

Kai had been ready to take on the creature himself, but now he felt it necessary to hold back, and he hesitated to move any closer. Instead, he decided he'd watch this attack for himself.

The sword held by the count was particularly well-forged, and its sharpness was something to be admired. But no matter how much power he might have put behind his swings, the blade cut apart the diabo's body far too easily for it to have been any ordinary weapon. Kai studied the long sword that the count held, and it was only then that he noticed its unusual shape.

Why does his sword look like a jawbone...?

Along the blade of the count's greatsword were several embedded spikes, which looked like a set of uneven teeth. Kai soon realized that each of these white spikes was similar to the instrument. The truthseeker's hidden weapon had also been made of some strange substance that could easily penetrate through the tough skin of a guardian bearer. These warped white shapes were like bones. Their rough forms suggested that some naturally occurring substance had been directly incorporated into the blade, and they made Kai feel a sense of disgust that was perhaps a form of trauma after having nearly been killed by a similar weapon.

It was a holy weapon for killing guardian bearers.

It looks a lot like a certain bone... it's like the shell of a guardian bearer's godstone.

At that very moment, Kai was under a form of protection that was coating his body with a similar substance. The special material of a godstone could block the diabo's negative status effect and was unaffected by the divine power of gods. Sharpening that substance and applying it to a weapon could create something like the instrument, which was capable of nullifying a guardian's blessings.

It made this the ideal weapon because its special properties could be used for slaying diabos. The series of attacks that the count had just pulled off would not have been possible with an ordinary iron weapon.

Kai continued to think about it.

Count Balta was a high-ranking lord with authority over all the lords of the borderlands, and his house had dealt with various calamities that were brought upon the land by his rise in power. It was unsurprising that House Balta should be in possession of some weapon specially designed for slaying diabos.

Kai also felt sure that that same weapon would also be useful against any human lord attempting to defy the count. It was like a trump card that could be used when faced with a guardian bearer rebellion.

With the blade held horizontal, the count put all of his might into a swing of the greatsword, creating a clean cut through the body of the diabo that rended it into two pieces, sending the upper piece into the air as if it had exploded free. Kai gazed in awe as he was covered in a rain of black fluids. Even with the aid of his mysterious weapon, it was impressive to see roughly a quarter of the diabo's body sliced away with a single swing.

The godstone must be hiding deeper inside the body. Though there's a good chance he'd hit it if he could slice it in half.

If it had been the same size as the salamander diabo Kai faced in the macaque settlement of Heju, a single swing may have caused the top part to land far away from the bottom. But the mass of the diabo before them was much greater, either because it had a higher level of divinity or because it was created by several gods sharing the same body.

The top half of the diabo that had been sliced away was falling back down like a billowing cloak, heading directly for the count, who was left off-balance by the

swing as if it used up all of his strength.

The count looked up in astonishment. The lords of the fortress towns raised their weapons in an attempt to defend him. They managed to stop the top part from falling straight to the ground by holding it back with their iron weapons, but when the count crawled out from under it, he fled and took refuge in the corner of the courtyard. Once there, he curled up as if unable to stand. A large amount of the fluid from the diabo must have touched his body, causing the negative status effect to be applied. He was clutching his chest as if it caused him great pain.

“Count...”

“My Lord!”

Anyone who touched the diabo would feel a sense of loss that was similar to having one’s godstone torn out. The count should have inherited some means of defense along with the special weapon, but the negative status effect had hit him completely, and now he was vomiting great volumes of blood. The lords of the fortress towns ran to him and dragged him to a safer spot. If the vast amounts of divine power that the count had stolen were being controlled by Baalitoliga, then that power must have gone berserk when Baalitoliga was weakened.

The count was now positioned where the statues of gods in the courtyard would shield him. The 200 statues of gods formed a wall, and several other lords had also taken refuge where there was a gap in that wall. That had indeed been a safe space, but it ceased to be so the moment that Count Balta took refuge there because he was the diabo’s target.

Can Count Balta still fight?

Kai stood on the battlefield where the other lords were risking their lives, and he appeared exposed and defenseless as he focused his attention on the count. A voice from somewhere yelled to him, “Watch out!” but Kai was able to dodge the tentacles coming at him without needing to look at them because he could feel their presence. Kai hadn’t let his guard down for a moment since starting his fight with the diabo underground. All he needed to do was hold his hat straight to stop it falling off as he dodged.

Kai even had time to wave in a show of gratitude toward the lord shouting the warning, whose name and face were unknown to him. Then he looked toward the diabo with a self-assured smile.

The diabo had been entirely focused on the count, but now it seemed to recognize Kai as the main threat. It sent several probing attacks toward him with its tentacles before placing some space between Kai and itself.

“All right. Let’s finish what we started.”

Kai stepped forward, free from concern.

The diabo reared up its strange body in an attempt to get further away. The diabo didn’t seem very intelligent, but it must have remembered Kai from their encounter in the underground darkness a short while ago.

Kai realized something as he studied the state of the aura covering the whole body of the diabo. He didn’t need the special vision given to him by the god of the valley.

It could have been a delusion caused by his overconfidence, but he felt he’d developed a stronger sense of intuition during his repeated battles with diabos, and now he felt that he somehow just knew where the godstone was located.

He had probably determined it based on the diabo’s slight movements and the feeling of its presence. There was also its shape, which looked ill-defined but was no doubt controlled by the godstone’s will. The place where its flesh was thickest would be considered the safest place. Given all this information Kai’s intuition could do the rest.

The diabo shuddered as if it loathed Kai’s gaze.

What the...?

Kai tilted his head out of curiosity.

His aura vision activated once more as if triggered by his thoughts, and this also appeared to be his intuition at work.

He watched as the shape and color of the diabo’s aura continued changing in an attempt to confuse him. It suggested that the diabo couldn’t decide how to defend itself against the paralysis that Kai had previously caused by delivering a

high voltage through an iron weapon penetrating its skin. However, Kai thought that this was the diabo getting ready to use some new trick. This misunderstanding caused just a short pause in the fight between the two, but that did nothing to diminish Kai's advantageous position.

He used a spear dropped by someone else to meet an incoming attack from a tentacle and moved quickly for the sake of those around him. Kai fearlessly charged in and tried to grab the diabo's tentacle, but its body began to pulsate as if it was trembling in the face of this strange enemy who wasn't weakened when touched.

The diabo's aura began to change in brightness in a dazzling manner once again. Just as Kai was attempting to perform the same attack as he had the first time, a massive black opening, like a dragon's mouth, appeared before him, and the diabo's aura suddenly intensified.

Fire breath!

He had remembered how the deuswulf had used the same attack.

Kai quickly got out of the path of the column of intense flames erupting from the mouth. He had to fight to prevent his blessings from switching to fire protection in response to the burns on his skin. If his blessings switched through a reflex reaction designed to protect the host, it could actually cost him his life here.

More importantly...

This thing can use fire magic...?

Kai looked at the diabo, still struggling to believe it.

The diabo had used magic as well as any practitioner of the arts might. That wasn't something that anyone could have predicted. Even Count Balta hiding among the statues and the powerful lords who had withdrawn from the fight could not have looked any more shocked.

This shock among Kai and the other humans may have been a terrible display of disrespect toward the gods. Humans crawled along the ground struggling to gain what knowledge they could, and in comparison to gods on a higher level of existence, they were little more than dirt.

They should have known that gods capable of imparting forms of resistance to their hosts were in possession of considerable knowledge themselves. It was then that Kai remembered.

That's right. I used the same magic.

Kai had burned away the tentacles using fire magic at the start of the fight. Perhaps the diabo had seen him do it and had then realized that it was possible to convert spiritual energy to magic in this world.

When the diabo knew that it had caused damage to Kai, it changed its tentacle attacks, which had been reliant upon the negative status effect until then. The tentacles it sent out became bathed in flames, and when Kai attempted to dodge these and approach the main body, the diabo was ready to unleash its fire breath once more.

The negative status effect that stripped away experience points upon touching someone's body was still active, while fire magic acted as a secondary attribute of its attacks. The diabo had unwittingly created an attack that could break through Kai's godstone armor, which was only effective against one type of damage.

Maintaining his resistance against diabos was challenging, but if he threw it away in his desperation, he'd be no better off than the other lords. It meant that he'd have to face the diabo's fire magic without his god being able to protect against it.

The tentacles were so hot that Kai felt intense heat just from getting near them, and he didn't feel like he'd be able to continue to avoid them while just using an iron spear. If they ended up in a close-quarters struggle, the iron was going to become red hot, at which point it would be as soft as candy.

Although it felt like death was near, Kai remained optimistic and felt sure he'd win. The thought became so amusing that he couldn't hold back his laughter. His unwillingness to give up and his confidence in his victory were signs of his excessive self-confidence, and he realized how ridiculous it was.

Kill the diabo!

The god of the valley shared Kai's desire.

There were numerous iron weapons embedded in the body of the diabo, presumably after numerous lords had attacked it. When the iron penetrated through to the inner parts of the diabo that lacked strong resistance, they became critical points of weakness.

Even without his electricity magic, Kai wouldn't be outdone by the diabo when it came to varieties of magic. He decided to create a form of protection against fire magic using his own magic that would allow him to cope with it for a short period of time. He soon realized that rather than forming a cold temperature where collisions occurred, it would be easier to meet it with wind magic so that a blast of air could help him escape the heat.

Once Kai lost the need to keep his distance from the diabo's attacks, he was able to approach the diabo fearlessly once more. It was then that the diabo tried to run from Kai.

This powerful enemy that had overpowered so many lords of the borderlands combined was now retreating in fear of a small boy. This miraculous spectacle had left everyone speechless and awestruck.

What now? How do I clean up this mess?

He caught an incoming tentacle and gripped it tightly. Then he pulled it like a mooring rope so that the diabo had no escape. The tentacle began to burn his palms, so he cooled them with a simple mental image of ice.

The diabo breathed fire wildly while Kai made a random jab with the spear. A single thrust left the spear useless so Kai simply threw it aside.

He didn't need a weapon anyway. If he needed to, he could break through the diabo's skin with his bare hands. He was about to use electricity magic without thinking, but then he stopped himself. That would be too boring.

He clung tightly to the diabo's flesh and created a tiny invisible sword at his fingertip. Though its skin was almost as hard as iron, he cut through it like the lid of a tin can as he rotated his wrist so as to move his impossibly sharp fingertip.

The diabo appeared to feel no pain, but for some reason it recoiled and cried out. The howling sound it made caused Kai's hair to stand on end.

Within the hole in his flesh that he had opened, the interior part of the diabo that lacked the protection of the skin was exposed and dripping with a dark black fluid that resembled blood. The sight of it gave Kai an idea.

If earth magic can work on inorganic things outside of my body... it should work on this blood.

He thrust his hand into the exposed and defenseless interior of the diabo and then spread out his consciousness inside. Using the expertise he'd gained from using earth magic previously, he formed a mental image of an expanding region that was under his control.

But there was more resistance than he expected. He should have predicted that.

The black blood wasn't merely a natural substance that had always existed. This was the basic material that the diabo had consciously brought together to serve as the body that would be its vessel in this world. It had an extraordinary level of control over it.

But even so, by exerting the power given to him by the god of the valley, he could just about force his way through. By limiting himself to controlling the black blood rather than all of the content, Kai's consciousness was able to ripple out and permeate through a large portion of the diabo's interior.

It was like feeling his way through the body with his bare hands, but he couldn't find the godstone of the diabo within the region his consciousness had covered. It may have been that the diabo felt a threat from Kai and instinctively knew to move its core away from him.

It didn't matter. For now, he used his earth magic to transform the bodily fluids of the diabo that were under his control. With the intention of stopping all liquid flow within its body, he tried forming crystals.

The result that this produced was enough to shock Kai himself.

The diabo was suddenly skewered by a multitude of black crystals that erupted out from its body. At the same time, black fluid sprayed from its torn skin.

"Uwah..."

He pulled his hand out of the hole quickly and found it covered in crystallized fluid, which he hastily shook off.

“Looks like a sea urchin,” Kai said quietly to himself.

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When they saw Kai’s overwhelming superiority, the lords around him became unstuck and began to approach the diabo. They all wanted to have the honor of striking the diabo at least once before it was slain. It was already a crowded courtyard because of the large size of the diabo, and now there was much less room to move.

And it was all happening while the diabo was still fully conscious.

“Bro! That was awesome!”

Yohna was among the other lords and quickly realized that the masked fighter was Kai from the village of Lag. But Kai didn’t want to acknowledge that quite so easily.

An even bigger problem was that Yohna was in his way.

It wasn’t just Yohna; a great number of lords were crowding around Kai. An illfated god that they knew only from legends, a creature that all the lords of the borderlands combined had struggled to fight, had been brought down by one mysterious child. Although they were fellow humans, these people were guided by muscle and not brain. Kai felt a little concerned that some of them might try to challenge him despite this being neither the time nor the place.

Yohna was boasting to everyone he knew, “This is my bro,” while trying to poke Kai in the side for no particular reason. The smile on his self-declared brother’s face froze when Kai dodged easily. Rather than give up, Yohna tried to wrap an arm around Kai’s neck, but Kai coldly struck Yohna’s arm away.

“Bro...”

“I don’t know you.”

The diabo was unable to move while skewered by its own bodily fluids, but it paid no attention to the swarm of lords that were attacking it as it began to give

out an aura from its entire body. This was the diabo engaging in trial and error, and Kai saw it as a sign that the diabo was acting intelligently. “Get back!” he yelled to those around him.

The idiots didn’t listen; they continued to strike at it and even tried to push Kai aside. Unsurprisingly, most those who ignored Kai were hit by a swipe from the tentacle that followed, causing the walking clumps of muscle to fall like an avalanche. They should have guessed this would happen. Fortunately, those who’d fallen unconscious were carried away by others nearby. They were taken within the first residence, thus removing many of the useless obstacles from Kai’s path. One thing Kai had noticed was that, while many of the lords had seen the tentacle coming and had reacted to it, virtually none of them had managed to deflect this simple attack using the weapons they carried. Ordinary guardian bearers on the level of doi or tres were completely outdone when fighting against a diabo.

Then the aura of the diabo increased significantly.

It seemed to have found some solution to the problem of the crystallized fluids that were tormenting it.

A moment later, the sharp crystals that had been skewering it became soft like candy and then finally returned back to their original state as bodily fluids.

It seemed the diabo now understood earth magic.

Without taking the trouble to recover its lost fluids, the diabo began to charge at Kai.

In its fury, it ignored everything other than Kai. When Kai swiftly dodged, its misshapen body continued to charge toward the entrance of the first residence while breaking through the lords that surrounded it. They fled to the left and right in a wild panic, but several of them were crushed by the massive body of the diabo.

Finally, it smashed against a wall, causing the entire castle to shake violently from the impact of the diabo’s body. Most of the windows on the surface shattered, and pieces of decorative stonework rained down.

The diabo slowly got to its feet and then charged towards Kai once more. It

was showing off its great mass while trying to crush its enemy to death under its heavy flesh. Its mollusk-like body was like a small mountain, and yet it leaped at him.

Kai watched its movement while preparing to deal the decisive blow.

He had already thought of several ways to bring down the diabo. One of the godstones of the diabo was in a thick mound of flesh to his right side. His gut feeling told him so.

He couldn't reach it with a single strike from his invisible sword. As he judged the distance, he ran to move himself closer. Tentacles came at him one after the other from the left and right. He dodged them with agile steps while using one of them like a spring to launch himself into the air. The loud voices of the lords reached his ears. They were surprised because Kai had been touched by the diabo many times up until this point, and yet he didn't receive the negative status effect from the diabo. It seemed that the art of diabo resistance wasn't known to a single house in the borderlands. It was a strange sort of ignorance considering that they had enough understanding to create weapons like the instrument.

Kai wondered if this knowledge had been intentionally suppressed by a small group of elites due to it being effective against guardian bearers in addition to diabos. Humans were species that had amassed power by holding together assemblies of gods. The ruling classes may have hidden their knowledge while hoping to maintain their control over them.

It was more than likely. This vulnerability could create big problems for guardian bearers.

Kai took just a few steps along the ground and reached his target position on the diabo's body, which continued to burn with blue embers. The diabo realized where Kai was targeting, but it was too late.

Now it's over... He had been about to use his invisible sword, but then he spotted an iron sword in the corner of his eye. His victory would look more impressive if he used this weapon rather than a sword that no one could see. He pulled the sword out of its body and then drove it back in with all his might, aiming at the place where he had seen the godstone.

It was a blunt sword, but Kai's strength was enough to drive the point through the tough skin of the diabo. Then he drove the sword further in to catch the godstone before it could escape. He'd felt a hard substance, so now Kai was certain that he had the very life of the diabo in his hands.

You're going back where you came from.

The sword wasn't quite long enough. But that was a trivial problem.

He extended the sword's length by pouring spiritual energy through his arm and on through the blade. His conceptual blade sliced the godstone in half as easily as piercing through a bubble.

The reasoning that allowed the diabo to take form in this world had been destroyed, causing its very existence to break down. The black substance that had made up the diabo contracted with alarming speed toward the point where the godstone had been, and then great amounts of flesh exploded outward an instant later. The flesh and translucent bodily fluids raining down were all that remained of Nevin's brethren.

There was a roaring cheer.

The lords were around him.

Their servants were around him.

The castle maids were gazing down at him from the broken windows.

They were overjoyed to see the ferocious monster had been slain. Even Kai couldn't ignore the unusual level of celebration happening around him. The diabo still had one godstone left. The need to remain ever alert was taught by Zula-ryu, which many derided as the martial arts of rundown villages.

The idiots came running out as if they had learned nothing from their mistake just a short while earlier. Kai yelled at them, "Stop!" as loudly as he could.

He turned away from them as he shook off his arms, which were sticky with the various bodily substances covering him. A single diabo was still there as it had always been.

Three gods had been called in from the outside, and so there were three godstones.

The mass of the diabo's body had been reduced to less than half of what it was originally. What remained seemed to have a lower level of divinity than the gods that had already been defeated. As Kai moved closer, its body drew back in fear. Kai picked up another sword that lay at his feet. But when he held it in his hand, he realized that it wasn't a useful weapon. The blade was too short to destroy the godstone. He soon threw it aside.

He glanced at the ground around him and saw no suitable weapons.

Then he heard a voice from the edge of the courtyard.

"Does this one suit you?"

The voice came from a bald-headed lord who'd fought continuously without fear. He was a lord with a quart sigil known as Zepeidra Entess. He threw Kai the massive war hammer that had been his weapon.

It landed with a clang that cracked the stone paving. Kai picked it up and showed his teeth to Lord Entess as he grinned. This massive weapon was probably too heavy for any ordinary human to hold unaided, but it was little more than a twig to someone with Kai's strength.

The other lords who witnessed this then began to throw him their own weapons one after another, urging him to use them. Dozens of weapons were thrown at him at once, reaffirming Kai's belief that these people were a bunch of idiots. But they were his kind of idiots.

Kai laughed madly as he carried the massive war hammer over his shoulder. As if his laughter was infectious, others around him also began to laugh.

Whatever weapon he used, his victory was a certain thing. Kai picked up two more swords and put them through his sash to show his appreciation as he walked toward the diabo.

There was no longer a significant distance between him and his enemy. The courtyard in front of the first residence had never been very large to start with. With each small step Kai took, the diabo's remaining time in this world was reduced. Everyone held their breath as they waited for it to happen.

But then...

No! Don't do it!

There was suddenly a voice that seemed to strike the top of his head.

Kai knew who the voice belonged to, but when he cast a defiant glance upward, he was left speechless.

The white figure he saw above him had for some reason revealed himself to the crowd as he came to land on the head of what remained of the diabo. This fellow protector appeared to have the same resistance against the diabolos as Kai.

As the bodies of his brethren spilled from his arms like broken toys, Nevin looked at Kai with his tear-filled eyes and then at the people gathered in the courtyard.

“It’s him who started this enshrinement. You have to let him defeat it.”

“Him...?”

It was clear which “him” Nevin referred to.

Kai looked at Count Balta, who was being nursed by his retainers among the statues, and everyone there also understood. But the count was suffering after having been touched by the diabo. The old man couldn’t even stand up, so there was no way they could force him to slay a diabo.

“Nevin.”

Nevin shook his head in response to Kai’s objections.

Then he wordlessly urged Kai to look into the sky.

In the snow clouds far above his head Kai could see something faint that sent shivers down his spine.

At first, he’d thought that it was the light of the morning sun breaking through the clouds. But as the fast-moving clouds passed by, he realized that that wasn’t the case.

Eyes...

He felt goosebumps across his whole body.

An instinctive sense of terror froze Kai in place.

What he saw were eyes, eyes, and more eyes, all staring down intently. The sky was packed with the eyes of massive entities far beyond compare with the frail life-forms that existed on the ground.

Nevin and Kai spoke via telepathy, as if this conversation was not for the ears of ignorant humans.

“We’ve invited in gods from outside. This world’s special to the gods from outside. That’s why they’re all jealous of the gods that were lucky enough to become part of our world. They’ve been watching the whole time.”

“B-But...”

“Valley One. Do you represent humanity?”

The question left Kai lost for words.

Kai was a human child and inhabitant of Lag, which was ruled by House Moloch. He’d undeniably been born and raised as a villager, but Kai understood that he’d become something very different from the moment he received his god’s blessings in the valley. The valley wasn’t part of the huge god assembly belonging to humanity. He’d also been open to accepting members from demi-human species, and he was increasingly becoming part of a nation where various demi-humans intermingled.

When asked whether he was here as a member of the human race, he was forced to admit otherwise.

“Because if you don’t, you’d better let him handle it.”

“But!”

“He was chosen. He has to prove that he has the power needed to be a king in these lands. He said he’d become a mainstay for the crumbling world of humans. If he can’t prove himself to be man enough, he’ll never win over the rabble watching.”

“What if he can’t beat it...?”

“Then everyone’s going down together. The world will give up on them all, along with their gods, and then comes the decline.”

“All the gods that are loyal to him will weaken too?!”

“Obviously. That’s what it means for gods to form an assembly. They pull each other up, and they drag each other down.”

Nevin’s eyes shone like glass orbs.

He looked devoid of life, as though he’d be better described as an inanimate doll. Nevin’s frighteningly transparent eyes were watching as humans struggled to control their fate.

“Descendent of Balta!” Nevin cried out.

“Fight!”

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Kai had no grasp of the overall picture. He didn’t know how many species existed in the world, nor how many territories the land was divided into. As an ignorant child of the borderlands, the knowledge accessible to him was always limited. He’d been fortunate enough to learn of the demi-human world north of the great forest, which led him to realize that humans held a territory so vast that it was beyond their means to manage it, and that this was not a normal state of affairs.

One circumstance that Kai had been almost completely unconscious of was that humans were one of the most powerful species—one of the ruling species of the world.

The human kingdom had been glorious and ever-growing as a result of their victories in battle during the time of their ancestors from many generations past, but now it had entered a time of long regression as they lost momentum, and their borders were threatened by other species that were on the rise. The priests that traveled across the borderlands spoke of an end of days in which the world fell into disorder.

Humanity could collapse. Kai didn’t know how likely that was, but in the time of their expansion, humans had eradicated many other species and claimed many lands, so they had no choice but to accept reality when the hunter became the hunted.

It was just survival of the fittest. It was inescapable, but Kai had thought that

their fate would be decided on the basis of direct battles alone.

I had it all wrong...

Kai stared speechlessly at the gods up above.

The transcendental nature of the gods allowed them to look down upon the world without a care, and their eyes were like the innocent eyes of children with no understanding of injustice, but they were also demanding.

Nevin had tried to educate the humans who had unknowingly put themselves on the path to destruction.

This previous protector who'd exposed his strange form to the onlookers kicked Count Balta's head and chided him for being so lazy as if he was no more than a brainless tool designed to hunt diabos.

"What was all that about momentum carrying you to your throne?! On your feet! Descendent of Balta!"

Nevin's strange form made it clear to those around him that he was a demi-human very different from humans. He was also the first winged form of demi-human they'd ever seen, which caused many to point their weapons at him, thinking he was some new form of diabo. When Nevin yelled at Count Balta it caused the lords of the fortress towns to stand on guard, and they might have all rushed Nevin if they had not been stayed by a gesture from Count Balta.

"Fight! If you won't get up and show them what you're made of, no one's going to do it for you!"

As this was going on, Kai could hear Nevin's voice in his head.

He was being told to stay quiet and watch. The despondency in his voice gave an insight into the depth of despair that Nevin felt.

"Valley One, my species ran from battle with their tails between their legs. I think that's when the gods got bored of us. It's no good if a species keeps fighting itself either. Even weak species have to cling on to a small piece of land and live as best they can. If you keep on losing, you'll end up like us... idiots who grow their wings and then don't know what to do with them."

"..."

The first thing that came to Kai's mind were the koror and the uzelles who had approached the valley in hope of extending the life of their species. He also thought of species like the woons who had accepted subservience to the macaques.

Although their land and their gods had been taken from them, they still held onto their wisdom.

"I think we must have committed some awful sin. The way my species declined was just horrible. We actually never lost to anyone, and yet the punishment given to us as the losers was so harsh."

Nevin tried to bring the bodies of his brethren that he held closer, but he didn't look at them. Instead, he smiled a faint and self-deprecating smile.

"The gods always give up on those who won't fight."

His eyes had narrowed as his bitter feelings built up.

Several unfamiliar terms came to Kai's mind and then vanished as if they'd been suggested to him by Nevin's words.

There was just one of these terms that remained in his mind.

Quantum observer effect.

He understood the words and what they meant. He tried to reject the idea as far-fetched, but then Kai looked up at the gods again and then looked back to the passionate eyes of the lords and castle servants who were standing all around them.

He looked at his own hand and tried creating a small fireball using magic before crushing it. It was then that Kai remembered the rules that caused things in this world to come into being.

Magic is just whatever the user wishes it to be...

The power that he called spiritual energy could be converted into physical phenomena through the power of his will.

It was not just guardian bearers, even ordinary people possessed small amounts of spiritual energy. Kai himself had enough spiritual energy to create a flame like a burning candle before becoming a guardian bearer. Changes to

reality on that scale were possible.

Which means this world could be...

He felt every hair stand on end. As someone born into this world, Kai had accepted the unchanging nature of the world without question. No one had ever provided any proof, but he had taken it for granted all the same.

What if this world is a creation of the gods...? A dream that exists only in their imaginations...

The very world itself may have been desired by transcendental beings who wished it into existence. It may have been influenced by their powerful imaginations.

The waning power of humans in recent years was plain to see, and if that was leading to a loss of affection towards humanity or disdain for the corrupt state of the center, then it could be hypothesized that this general feeling would have an influence on the world itself.

If that was a possibility, then it went beyond the gods from outside. The impressions of every human watching could potentially give rise to magic that might change the world itself. Kai felt a stirring of emotion when he realized that Nevin wasn't just looking at Count Balta as a failure, there was also pity in his eyes.

When Count Balta began the enshrinement process, he positioned himself as a representative of humanity. Now that he'd boosted his own power by stealing the power of gods, humanity would lose face if this proved insufficient for him to complete the ritual by slaying the diabo.

Kai could see that Count Balta's own spiritual energy was weakened because of the negative status effect caused by the diabo, leaving him unable to control the excessive amounts of spiritual energy he'd taken from the gods that wasn't entirely his own. He suffered as if he'd taken poison into himself, reminding Kai of how Elsa had once been poisoned by godstone marrow.

The jelly-like marrow found within the godstone that served as a god's perch was somehow a potent poison when consumed by members of the same species. He thought of it as a negative status effect caused by touching the

diabo, but actually, the marrow within the godstone may have been some form of condensed poison that always came with divinity.

The excessive divinity became a poison that ate away at the flesh of Count Balta. Now that Kai understood this, he approached closer with the borrowed war hammer still carried over his shoulder.

“Didn’t I just tell you to stay out of it?”

“I’m done fighting. But I can still help.”

“Out of my way,” Kai ordered the lords of the fortress towns as they tried to block his path. Some obediently stepped back but some still barred his path. He knew that these lords, praised as the Holy Northern Crown since ancient times, were individuals with blessings from arch gods passed down through generations of House Balta, making them more powerful than the other lords of the borderlands

The sigils on their faces were all either level 5 or level 6. Although level 6 sigils merely indicated a higher level of divinity than level 5, the difference in ability between those with a level 5 and a level 6 sigil was considered immense in the society of nobles. Unknown to Kai, level 6 sigils, which were typically possessed by lords of large towns with thousands of subjects, were given the somewhat lengthy name of seiscabares sigil throughout the kingdom.

Two lords of fortress towns crossed their weapons to bar his path in the style of guards, and they allowed their sigils, which were probably seiscabares sigils, to appear on their faces. They blocked his way and told him, “You’ll go no further,” but he had no time to waste, so he tried to force his way through.

He took hold of their weapons, one in each hand, and effortlessly pushed them aside. If Kai had kept his kumadori hidden, he would have just barely been able to push a single tres sigil aside. However, Kai had no intention of hiding his strength at that point. His face was partially concealed by a tattered hat, so they could only see the edges of his kumadori. The people of the borderlands must have underestimated him, thinking that he could not possibly be on the level of a seiscabares sigil. They were both visibly surprised when Kai was able to push them aside.

Kai ignored the shocked air of lords and went to kneel by Count Balta’s side as

the count was still struggling to stand. When the unknown warrior looked down on him, Count Balta tried to grab him at the chest, but his hand was easily knocked away. The sight of the count's abnormally muscular body made Kai feel as though this wasn't an elderly man before him.

The aura around his chest's so faint. It got him good.

He put his hand to the bloodstained chest and sent spiritual energy into the paralyzed godstone. As if drawn out by Kai's power, heat began to overflow from Count Balta's godstone and even his breathing returned to normal once he'd coughed up a large amount of blood.

Kai heard footsteps nearby and turned to see that Nevin had landed on the ground and was now walking towards them on his small bare feet.

"I'm not letting you help him any more than that, Valley One."

"I won't do anything more."

"Now we start the enshrinement for real! In accordance with my agreement with the first Balta, I shall bear witness. Rise, Current Balta."

When Kai stood quietly next to Nevin, he must have looked like someone who could not be classified as human.

"You swore to me that you were ready for this. Now fight!"

This witness seemed strangely majestic, and might even have been described as charming.

"If you do lose, you'd better die fighting."

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With his body recovering, Count Balta was now able to stand. For a moment, he looked in awe at Kai who appeared to have healed him, and then he looked at Nevin who stood at Kai's side.

He finally realized that Nevin had shown his unusual form to the people around them, which made his eyes go wide as he looked about him.

"Forget about me. I'm finished."

“...”

“Don’t worry. Every single one of the sealed eggs hatched. There was enough leftover power for that. But despite all my prayers, it was all a disaster.”

The count looked at the bodies in Nevin’s arms and then he closed his eyes for a time. He pushed away the hands that were offered to him and climbed to his feet unaided.

“It’s all down to you now.”

“Yes. Right, you are.”

“I’ll be watching until the very end. Fight a good fight.”

“If I fail, I trust you’ll take care of the rest, Protector of Yaso.”

It was an informal exchange, like a conversation between two old friends.

It seemed as though Nevin had always lived with House Balta ever since the first Balta became warden of the borderlands. It was a mystery why humans would form such a relationship with the species that had fled from the human invasion and had cowardly tried to hide underground.

It was easy to imagine that ancient species who had long been there had hidden underground while House Balta ruled the surface and worked tenaciously to eradicate them. If some relationship between them had arisen while humans were the dominant species, then it seemed likely that Nevin had once given himself to House Balta.

He’s finished...?

The way Nevin looked at Count Balta while seemingly devoid of emotion was heartbreaking to see.

“I see,” Count Balta muttered. “The children were already beyond saving.”

The count lifted up the greatsword that resembled the jaw of some great beast and dragged it along behind him.

His gaze shifted to Kai for a moment, and then he nodded to him as if he accepted him as another protector. For a child born to a cold village in the borderlands like Lag, the warden of the borderlands was like an entity beyond

the clouds. It was a strange thing to see respects being paid in the opposite direction to what would be expected. Although Count Balta said nothing, Kai felt he had been asked to simply bear witness as the count walked away.

Kai had now left it for another to fight against the diabo. As if everyone around understood that the fight was now a test of the power of the human species, silence fell and no one so much as cleared their throat. Then the count resumed his fight, casually, and without hesitation. The first strike that cut into the diabo triggered a wave of cheering from the crowd.

“Our warden!”

“Do it! Kill it!”

“Glory to humanity!”

“Count Balta!”

“Glory to House Balta!”

“Long live humanity!”

This was the enshrinement ritual in full swing.

The lords of the borderlands, the castle servants, and young people who may have been members of House Balta. They were all cheering in hoarse voices as though their throats might tear. Count Balta responded to these cheers of support with a swing of his sword.



It wasn't one of the large, random swings from before. He sliced into the diabo's body like it was a piece of fruit, and with two cuts he removed a large piece of flesh. The lords of the fortress towns were ready to knock back the piece of flesh that fell, putting it at a greater distance. They repeated the process to steadily wear away the diabo's vessel.

Although they didn't know where the godstone was, they were bound to find it by slicing away at the body. The count continued to cut and cut and cut, as if his muscular body was unaffected by fatigue. The courtyard soon became littered with diabo flesh.

The triumphant humans were cutting away at it with ease. But this spectacle only lasted for a very short time.

Nevin had never told Count Balta about resistances based on bony substances. The count couldn't help but be hit with the occasional splash of bodily fluids from the diabo as he engaged in close combat with it, and his movements were becoming sluggish once more.

Nevin had never shared the knowledge that Kai knew to be indispensable when fighting a diabo.

Resistances were like a form of magic that the god would always be applying to keep their vessel protected, so activating it was as simple as asking one's god. The threshold for using such magic was incredibly low. Kai wondered why the count hadn't been told, and then an explanation came to him.

It's his final revenge against House Balta...

For a moment, Kai became suspicious of Nevin, but then he rejected the idea.

Kai was here on the side of the humans, so that sort of underhanded trick by Nevin would be easily exposed.

I thought it was simple, but maybe it's not? Maybe resistances aren't as easy as just asking your god...

Guardian bearers carrying gods within them gained an increase in spiritual energy and a transformed body. The god would place blessings on the body to protect and reinforce it for the sake of defending their perch. In addition to the

basic toughness they started with, the god could add special resistances such as fire resistance in response to external stimuli such as a magic attack.

Bony substance resistance was the same in that it could easily be activated if the god only knew that it was necessary for protecting their host. But for some reason, it wouldn't happen as an automatic response from the god. It seemed to be a prerequisite for the host to understand the phenomenon, so they could request the resistance from their god just as Kai had.

Some method of communication was necessary.

Now it made sense.

Communication is key, Kai realized.

Even a protector like Kai found it quite difficult to establish a conversation with the god of the valley within him. It was quite possible that Count Balta had never actually spoken with his god.

Without a conversation, his wishes couldn't be expressed. It was a simple explanation.

"Balta! Cowardice will be the death of you!"

"...!"

Nevin was heartlessly scolding Count Balta as his movements slowed.

Count Balta's suffering must have intensified each time he was bathed in more fluids from the diabo, and it was clear that his fear of death was growing. But if he rested or tried to flee, the separated parts of the diabo would rejoin the body, allowing it to recover. Meanwhile, Count Balta was growing increasingly weak as the poison seeped through to the divine spirit within him. The situation was steadily growing worse.

As if responding to Nevin's scolding, Count Balta intensified his attacks. He wiped away large volumes of sweat and breathed heavily as the muscles on his back throbbed.

Kai had promised not to join the fight.

But he hadn't promised not to give advice.

“Count! The godstone’s a little to the left!”

Kai had realized that it would be tough if Count Balta simply swung his weapon blindly, so he began to guide him toward the godstone.

Nevin didn’t say much more. He simply muttered, “Those are some eyes you’ve got.”

Without looking back, the count responded to Kai’s guidance. The lords of fortress towns redoubled their efforts and began to focus on the diabo’s thrashing tentacles. There were only a few tentacles remaining.

“It moved! More to the left!”

The interior of the diabo contained nothing but black flesh and fluids. It meant that it could control the position of the godstone according to its own will. It knew that this was its ultimate weak point, and it therefore moved the godstone around when faced with a strong enemy. Kai’s intuition worked similarly to how he’d read an opponent’s breath in battle.

It was a test of endurance for both the count and the diabo.

“Count...”

“Count Balta!”

The crowd were caught up in the atmosphere of the battle, but among them Kai felt there was someone out of place silently moving through the crowd, so he looked toward the presence he felt.

The gon-no-sōzu and his fellow priests were there with staffs held in their hands.

Their voices could not be heard over the noise of the crowd, but Kai saw the priests spread out across the courtyard in response to a hand gesture from the gon-no-sōzu. Kai knew that they were planning to get involved somehow.

“Wait here a moment,” Kai said when Nevin looked ready to follow him.

His nimble feet carried him across the courtyard and he stood before the gon-no-sōzu, preventing him from moving forward. Kai appeared quite suddenly, so it was not just gon-no-sōzu, but all the lords nearby, who recoiled in surprise.

“An enshrinement ritual is in progress. Stand back.”

The gon-no-sōzu guessed that the one blocking his path was Kai from the village of Lag, and he straightened his body warily while narrowing his eyes somewhat.

“This heresy goes against the teachings of Manu. Humans owe their prosperity to the great power of the glorious god assembly ruled over by our king. Those who would destroy the very fabric of the nation must be punished as heretics.”

“I don’t care. None of that matters.”

“The greatest lesson learned by humans is that there is wisdom in governing by supporting our great king while suppressing the rising of small kings. The fabric of the Unified Kingdom must only consist of a single, unified piece. It is in such sprawling god assemblies that Great Manu resides.”

The teachings that traveling priests preached to ignorant commoners were about working hard and offering loyal service to one’s superiors. They also promoted a number of everyday virtues that helped one to accomplish these aims.

When all was said and done, these teachings merely served to ensure that the king in the center would not lose his control over the god assembly.

In a world where there existed a multitude of gods, it was ironic that they’d need to find an unquestionable god born out of the concept of a god assembly. There were far too many gods, so humans looking for a thing to be revered must have searched for some entity of even higher divinity that they could not see.

The gon-no-sōzu was trying to stand up to Kai’s power, but he had nothing to say to Kai’s next retort.

“As a protector, I command you. Be silent.”

“...!”

Behind the gon-no-sōzu were the faces of those who were held back in the first residence. They were high-ranking nobles of the center and the members

of House Moloch. Kai's lord Vezin and Vezin's son Olha were both taken aback by Kai's attitude toward the gon-no-sōzu, and Lady White was looking at him in disbelief.

The other lady from the center was also looking at Kai with great interest.

"Shut up and watch."

With the order given, Kai turned back toward the enshrinement ritual. He watched over it as a protector.

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The gods were watching over them.

The declining humans were fighting the diabo with their dignity on the line.

The great warrior of the borderlands, Count Balta, was fighting this misshapen god with nothing but a sword as they cut at each other's flesh.

The diabo must have finally realized that it was in a difficult situation because it was now going all-out with each attack. It breathed ferocious fire and spread bodily fluids like a poison that carried its curse.

Count Balta stepped forward to prove himself worthy to be their king god and the lords of the fortress towns acted as shields to protect him from attacks, but they were knocked down one after the other.

"Another two yules!"

With the voice guiding him, Count Balta struck wildly, and he released a mad howl from his stomach that seemed to bolster his courage. His muscles tightened like straw ropes as he thrust his strange sword at the body of the diabo.

When the final fortress town lord collapsed from exhaustion, the chunks of cut-away flesh were thrown aside using the blade of the count's sword.

"One more yule!"

With no one to guard him, the count had no choice but to leave himself exposed. Meanwhile, the diabo faced a predicament as the flesh around the

godstone that was its weak point was being cut away. Everyone sensed that the conclusion of the battle was coming.

One more yule. That placed it within range of the count's greatsword.

The excited cheering of the humans may or may not have reached Count Balta's ears. He swung his greatsword upward to defend himself, and then the diabo unleashed its fire. Count Balta was burned by the red-hot flames, but it didn't diminish his fighting spirit. Without stopping, he cut through the body of the diabo with a single swing.

The godstone of the diabo.

If he could destroy the godstone serving as the source of its life, this god of calamity would be destroyed.

The humans understood this from having watched the diabo fight with the protector, and there was an explosion of emotion during this decisive moment. Every single one of them was shouting themselves hoarse.

But a few moments later, the diabo had not disappeared.

With his strange sword still inside the diabo's body, the count stopped as if he'd become stuck in time.

It was Kai who was the first to realize what was wrong.

"That sword can't break through the godstone! Finish it with an iron blade!"

The sword wielded by the count had been carved from the bones of an ancient guardian bearer. Although it was effective against a god's protective barrier, the material was no more than bone. It could cut through ordinary flesh, but it couldn't destroy the godstone because it was made of the same substance.

Even Kai was grinding his teeth at this surprising setback while giving guidance.

Using his bony substance resistance, he could have easily grabbed the diabo's godstone with his bare hands to pull it free. But the count lacked such protection and couldn't use the same method. It meant that he needed an iron blade.

Count Balta was bold enough to release his grip on the greatsword while it was still embedded in the diabo. The count then picked up the weapon of one of his fallen allies before resuming his attack. As if it feared its impending death, the diabo sent out the remains of its last tentacle.

The count dodged it with agility and rolled across the ground to continue moving closer. It was a clumsy roll that had him moving on all fours like a beast, but it carried him forward. The count was badly wounded and approaching his limit.

The count's fingernails scratched at the stone paving as he desperately charged ahead, and he thrust the long blade of the sword outward. The greatsword that he'd left embedded in the body had ensnared the diabo's godstone so that it couldn't move away.

With one last sword strike, he penetrated the diabo's godstone, destroying it.

**

"For what reason do you interfere in human affairs, Galdio, protector of demi-humans."

"..."

"Or perhaps I should address you as He who was Kai of Lag."

"Be quiet."

"We had been told to be wary of Lag. He who was Kai of Lag. If it had not been for the events here, we would have realized it sooner."

Kai turned his back on the gon-no-sōzu while he was still speaking.

When Kai heard the rustling from the priest's clothes, he softly told him, "It's no use."

"..."

Kai felt a sharp pain in his back and glanced back over his shoulder with narrowed eyes.

He saw the gon-no-sōzu, frozen to the spot in shock. In his hand he gripped a familiar-looking tool. The tool was like a rod with a white bone sharpened to a

point on one end. Kai recognized it as the instrument used to kill guardian bearers.

Kai was still protected by his bony substance resistance at that point, so the tool for killing guardian bearers was no better than an ordinary bone.

“I’ve had trouble with your kind before. I knew what to expect.”

“So an instrument of this grade is ineffective...”

“It still hurts. Put it away if you don’t want a punch in the face.”

The gon-no-sōzu stowed the tool in his pocket, though he didn’t back down. “Will you not kill this priest in the same manner?” he asked.

Kai guessed that he was referring to the truthseeker he’d killed before. “I will if I have to,” he replied. He said it as though he could easily kill the priest whenever he chose.

Kai’s choice of words made the gon-no-sōzu’s face twitch. He looked over to the other priests who were awaiting instructions and told them to prioritize their main objective. Kai’s hand gripped the gon-no-sōzu at his chest a moment later.

“What are you trying to do?”

“Great Manu of the divine tree has no need for diseased branches.”

According to the Manu religion, the fabric of the Unified Kingdom was the great god assembly controlled by the king of humans, and this god assembly was worshiped as a divine entity. This was a high priest from Manu’s main headquarters, the monastery of Maas, who was allowing his kumadori to show while bringing his hand to Kai’s wrist in an attempt to resist him.

“The gods form connections and thus become an assembly, and the shape of these connections is like that of a single tree. Great Manu of humanity was born from the seed formed by the first generation of the Holy House Kushalu, and the king gods that descended from them each served as a great trunk of a tree whose branches have spread so far.”

“...”

“The beautiful tree that humans have created can bear god fruit of the purest

power given a thousand years. Great Manu has informed us that humans will ascend to greater heights. Those one thousand years have almost passed. We cannot allow a diseased branch to weaken humanity's precious god tree at this late stage. Before that can happen, we must prune the rotten branch."

Count Balta had used all of his strength to slay the diabo, leaving his back exposed and defenseless at that moment. The intense cheering from the crowd was so loud that the priests spreading out across the courtyard made no sound, as if they were actors in a silent movie.

In their hands they held instruments for killing guardian bearers, just as the gon-no-sōzu had.

"Nev—"

As Kai tried to call out, he felt some sort of lump enter his mouth and stop his breathing. Kai had let his guard down for just a moment, and the gon-no-sōzu had seized the opportunity to work some magic with his hands. Kai guessed that this was another form of magic taught by the monastery, but he had no idea how it stopped him from breathing as he pushed the gon-no-sōzu away from himself.

What is this?

It was like the very air had been compressed into a lump.

It stopped his breathing, but it couldn't stop his thoughts. Words went through Kai's mind with explosive intensity, aimed at Nevin, who was watching over Count Balta.

"Nevin!"

Nevin turned toward Kai and then his expression changed as he saw that Kai was clutching at his chest and struggling to breathe.

"Valley One!"

"Stay back! Go protect him!"

"From what?"

Kai's hand gestures made Nevin notice the movements of the priests who'd suppressed their presence as they crept closer.

As Kai leaned forward in his suffering, a quick upward kick was skillfully aimed at his jaw. It had clearly been an attack intended to knock Kai unconscious, but practitioners of Zula-ryu were always searching for a path to victory, even on the verge of death. Kai dodged with the slight movement of his jaw and then tackled the gon-no-sōzu while his leg was still raised in the air.

When Kai used his full strength, a man of average height like the gon-no-sōzu could be lifted up easily. The gon-no-sōzu was skilled enough to attempt a hold using his arms the moment his leg was lifted off the ground, but he was launched away by Kai's strength before his hands could reach him.

He threw the leg he was holding up into the air. When the gon-no-sōzu spun through the air, Kai grabbed his defenseless back and slammed him down to the ground.

Kai could hear it as all of the air was expelled from the gon-no-sōzu's lungs.

His body bounced up into the air after the upper half of his body struck the ground, and Kai used that timing to mercilessly follow up with a kick. He didn't even watch as the kick sent the gon-no-sōzu rolling away.

The gon-no-sōzu must have lost consciousness because the lump of air preventing Kai from breathing then vanished. Kai breathed heavily, desperate for oxygen.

How'd he do that? It's like he used the image of a balloon.

It was a useful magic that Kai had never imagined. Maas had no doubt accumulated the wisdom of many generations of magic users and martial artists. It made him want to receive lessons from them someday.

"Kai!"

A familiar voice called out to him. He turned and saw Lady White making her way towards him through the crowd. The crowd was mostly made up of clumps of muscle many times heavier than her, so she wasn't making much progress. But Kai would have preferred it if she hadn't felt the need to shout his name so loudly.

Fortunately, few people were paying attention to him because of the commotion as the priests attacked Count Balta.

Lady White stopped after Kai waved to show that he was unharmed. Then his eyes met those of the noble lady from the center who just happened to be standing between them. For some reason, she was shyly waving back at him. It seemed she had recognized him underneath his disguise.

How?

He also saw Yohna waving to him in the same way. None of them seemed to have considered Kai's feelings. He figured he'd need to have a little talk with everyone at some point.

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The gon-no-sōzu had been silenced.

If this was the best the head of the group could do, Kai supposed that the other protector would be able to deal with his underlings quickly enough. Kai's thoughts had already turned to how they'd deal with the aftermath.

Kai telepathically called out to Nevin to check how things were going, and it was then he realized that Nevin wasn't responding.

"Nevin...? What's up?"

Still he got no response.

Feeling panicked, he used his voice rather than telepathy.

"Nevin! What's wrong?!"

Kai's sudden shouting was loud enough to startle those standing near him.

Kai's wide pupils fixed on the figure of Nevin, who was keeping perfectly still.

Nevin's gaze was aimed at Count Balta, who couldn't even stand without using his sword to support himself. Multiple priests were rushing at the count from all sides at that moment.

Nevin was a bystander.

The protector merely observed Count Balta's moment of crisis.

"Save him!"

Despite Kai's yelling, Nevin did not move at all.

He merely watched without emotion as the count became increasingly wounded.

Then Count Balta's eyes seemed to close as he used up what little strength he'd had remaining.

"It's an internal problem for the species," Nevin replied bluntly.

He said it as if he expected Kai to understand that this was why he remained a bystander.

Porek, the koror elder, had once addressed the god of the valley as "God of Arbitration." Kai had a vague notion of arbitration as a process where solutions were found to the benefit of two opposed species. Based on what Porek had said, this involved giving assistance to weak species by lending them strength and ensuring their continued survival.

"No one's threatening humanity here. They don't need a protector for this."

"Nevin..."

"It's their choice."

Nevin and Count Balta exchanged glances.

Count Balta did not blame Nevin for forsaking him. Like grass swaying in the wind, he accepted his fate but kept his composure.

"If you wanna live, fight for your life."

"I was never counting on anyone's help."

The strange greatsword was no longer in the count's hands. All he held onto was a sturdy-looking iron sword.

His relaxed muscles then switched to powering a broad sideways sword swing that caused the priests charging at him to swiftly jump back. Their refined martial arts were those of Maas. Count Balta tutted in frustration and then began repelling waves of attacks from the priests one after another, but his reactions were dulled.

There were several among the priests who were capable of displaying a kumadori. They wouldn't have posed a problem for the count if he was in peak condition, but his current situation was grim.

Count Balta was close to being killed.

This unexpected development caused Kai to cast a look of disbelief toward the gon-no-sōzu, but then he realized that the gon-no-sōzu had hidden himself in the crowd while running toward the courtyard. The priests were openly attempting to kill Count Balta, and yet the lords around him had not come to his aid.

Perhaps it was such an unexpected development for them that they had been too shocked to respond.

"Stay out of it, Valley One."

"..."

Kai's thoughts were nipped in the bud, and he hesitated to move.

From the way Nevin spoke, Kai guessed that being a protector came with certain restrictions.

"Listen to me, you little shit. Stay out of it."

His head was then filled with a faint mumbling that spread out like ripples through his brain.

In that same moment, a faint image came to him of a small, crying child, and without needing context, Kai understood that the child was Count Balta in his younger days.

These were Nevin's feelings toward someone who'd long been at his side. It was the sort of affection one felt for a family member, but it crossed the boundary between the two species. Kai gritted his teeth as he realized that this situation was torment for Nevin.

"This can't be! Protect the count!"

A few anxious lords had finally realized that something wasn't right. They awoke from their stupefied states and took action. Over 200 guardian bearers of the borderlands were bound together by their loyalty to Count Balta, and

together, they were just barely able to repel the invasions from the demi-humans that surrounded them. If they were to lose their master here, it would be a grave crisis for the entirety of the borderlands.

Zepeidra Entess chased after one of the priests, grabbed the back of his robes, and dragged him down to the ground.

Headhunter Bahaal roared “Prosperity to the borderlands!” in a hoarse voice as he ran across the courtyard. When he realized he wouldn’t reach Count Balta in time, he urged the lords closer by to act.

Several lords who had been hiding in the courtyard while waiting for the right moment now charged out into the courtyard and headed toward Count Balta.

Then, as if the floodgates had opened, lords of the borderlands rushed forward, and priests realized that they’d be rushed from behind. “Die as martyrs!” the gon-no-sōzu cried to them as he produced an item that had been concealed within his sleeve. He placed it into his mouth and crushed it with his teeth. The other priests produced similar round pills, which they all swallowed. Their morale soared as the medicine gave them new confidence.

No more than 10 priests, the gon-no-sōzu included, had been dispatched from Maas. More than one hundred lords of the borderlands were now trying to overwhelm them. Everyone thought that the outcome was as clear to see as a naked flame.

However, the borderlands was an extremely vast stretch of land, and many different types of lord ruled over it. Some of them were lords with close ties to the center, and some were tied to the center through bonds of blood. Those lords, along with the nobles from the center, chose to aid the priests, throwing the courtyard into chaos.

“I reject you! Count Balta!”

The only voice Kai could make out was one from someone near him.

It was Count Valma Colsarouge, a noble from the center whose daughter had expected to marry into House Balta until a short while ago.

His eyes began filling with a deep-seated rage.

“How dare you proclaim yourself heavenly?! What arrogance! What insolence!”

A low-ranking lord attempted to rush Count Valma, but was knocked aside with a single punch.

Though Count Valma carried himself with grace, this count was a high-ranking guardian bearer, and the half-baked lords of the borderlands could not compare.

As a father whose daughter was given as an offering to a diabo, he was seething with rage. The nobles from the center around him were also becoming aggressive as they displayed the kumadori inherited from their ancestors.

“We reject you, Count Balta!”

“You cannot have forgotten your debt to the blue blood of holy Kushalu and the deities of our forefathers!”

“My house hereby severs all ties to House Balta!”

“This traitor aims his bow at the Unified Kingdom!”

The borderlands trembled.

An internal dispute between humans was destroying the bonds that connected their land gods.

It made no sound and it couldn’t be seen; it was like something in the air as the bonds that had always connected the people of the borderlands were broken apart.

Each time a bond broke, it was as though the air itself shook. Kai felt goosebumps. He knew this was a dangerous omen that warned of something unthinkable.

“...!”

Suddenly, he felt a presence above his head and turned his gaze upward.

High in the winter sky, amid the dancing snowflakes, the sunlight had grown stronger with the passage of time.

The formless gods were present as before between the gray-colored clouds,

and Kai could see their wild behavior. As if the chaos among humans excited them, the formless gods writhed and issued barely audible cries.

It was just like the soldiers when they watched the baron's special training sessions. They were like brainless foot soldiers enjoying a good fight. Kai felt cold beads of sweat run down his forehead when he realized that the gods were watching his species embarrass itself.

Then Kai became aware of the inexplicable phenomenon taking place: "The snow's falling up..."

It was as though the world had been turned upside down without him noticing. From the top of the mountain on which the castle stood, he could see the surface of the borderlands all around him, and from that surface rose countless white lights that silently began rising toward the sky. His absurd guess at what was happening had been the result of him mistaking those lights for snow.

It was when Kai saw the real snow falling in the opposite direction, from high up toward the ground in accordance with natural laws, that he realized that those rising lights were not snow, and were more like some strange phosphorescence.

As the dispute between humans approached its peak, the number and intensity of those phosphorescent lights increased. No one else noticed this baffling spectacle. But then the priests saw it. The gon-no-sōzu was the first to notice.

It's like an aura.

The once rational-minded gon-no-sōzu now wore a horrified look on his face as he cursed those around him: "You damned heretics!"

There was a frenzied look in the eyes of the other priests as their desire to kill intensified.

Kai's intuition told him that these phosphorescent lights being drawn upwards were the blessings of land gods—the divine power of land gods that had been incorporated into the land until now. The ties between the lords of the borderlands had broken down and the blessings gained from their assembly of

gods had been lost. It meant that the divine energy of the land gods could not be held onto any longer and was evaporating into the sky. Or at least that was Kai's guess.

He felt certain that his reasoning was more or less accurate.

It's destroying the borderlands.

Deep within his chest, he felt something like a trembling from the god of the valley.

The world could not be relied upon to remain the same forever. The memory of the nation of the macaques, which had been reduced to ruin after their blessings were devoured by a diabo, was still fresh in Kai's mind.

The world before him was born out of a precise balance between various factors. The world was as delicate as a piece of glasswork.

There had to be someone to protect this beautiful, yet fragile world.

Such was the job of a protector.

Kai came to his senses and began to ask himself what he could do for the world. He thought so hard that he even forgot to breathe.

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Humanity risked losing the borderlands.

That had once been unimaginable, but now it was close to being reality. While fascinated by the beauty of the phosphorescent lights rising toward the sky, Kai imagined that this was the scattering of blessings that were the life of the land, and it made him feel as though the land itself was spilling blood.

This was a featureless, poor and barren land, and some would say it could not be much worse than it already was.

But they'd be mistaken.

There are a million humans controlling so many land gods. That's why they can make the borderlands fertile enough for humans to live here.

In reality, the land was much less hospitable.

The true state of the land might have been unsuited to supporting life at all. It was perhaps no more than a vast, unforgiving wasteland. The land had been ruled over by humans who commanded incredible power, which meant they could enhance its inherent fertility just enough to produce grain. That seemed like the correct way to think of it.

When Nevin's declining species had given up the land so easily, perhaps that was because they saw no value in it. Perhaps that was why they made their nests underground.

Kai had no idea what sort of strange creatures had ruled over the borderlands in times of old before the arrival of humans. But he knew that they had been able to put down roots in the land as infertile as the borderlands, so he assumed that they must have been beast-like creatures with no knowledge of farming.

The present state of the borderlands was a sort of miracle.

If even such low levels of fertility were valued highly within this barren land, then it was easy to understand why others had been so desperate to steal the land of humans.

The head of House Balta was effectively the ruler of all the borderlands and had made his own plans to protect the fertility of the borderlands. The old protector had said it was wrong to give excessive support to a single species, and yet he was also deeply involved in the government of humanity, which was already one of the most powerful species. Their actions made sense when Kai realized both shared the goal of preserving the miraculous increase in the fertility of the land.

If the land became fertile, the land gods became stronger. This was obvious when comparing the power of the blessings on different lords in the borderlands. The more fertile the village or the larger the town that they ruled over, the stronger they were and the higher the rank of their sigil. For example, Count Balta possessed the most developed city, and his power was incredible. It was a sign that the fertility of the land was a form of virtue in this world.

If the borderlands fall apart, other species will start moving. If I don't do something, I won't be able to defend the valley.

With the human nation breaking down, the orgs were bound to come from across the forest to claim humanity's land. It was more than likely that the nation of the valley would be within their sphere of activity as they gathered in the forest to prepare for a large-scale invasion.

Kai's subjects who were gathering around the valley were still too weak. As far as nations went, the valley was still in its infancy and they needed more time to prepare for such a crisis.

I need to fix this in a way that stops the human lords of the borderlands from fighting each other. What can I do? I have to think...

Nevin had told him not to intervene.

Nevin himself had gotten involved in many ways, so he was in no position to lecture others. But to Nevin, there was probably no contradiction between the virtue of preserving the fertility of the land and the virtue of serving as a protector without getting involved in the internal disputes of a species.

Kai asked himself how he saw things.

Humans had always been Kai's own kind. He was one of those who was caught up in this internal dispute, so it was only natural for him to get involved as a member of the same species. Fixing this situation was a higher priority than the need to remain impartial as a protector. It was even possible that Nevin had mistaken Kai as the previous vessel of the god of the valley and therefore thought that he wasn't actually human.

Rather than continuing to dither, Kai decided to take decisive action.

He would walk out amid the human chaos and reveal to them the nation of the valley that had grown with a protector at its center, and then he'd establish a relationship with humanity that was as advantageous to him as possible. The koror and uzelle felt the same deep-seated hatred toward orgs that humans felt. Unless everyone worked together, there was no way to face this common enemy, and the current state of humanity could be exploited to the advantage of the nation of the valley.

The human king is too far away. If I'm going to form an alliance with someone, I best pick Count Balta since he's right here.

He could place Count Balta in his debt.

Rescuing the count now would provide a minimal level of stability across the region, and then the nation of the valley could create strong ties with the humans after Kai saved the life of the “king of the borderlands.” Friendship and stability would follow. Kai was both a human and the king of the valley, so he felt no qualms when he justified his own decision to act in a way that gave him power over the survival of the species.

A hand caught a shoulder just as he was about to run into the courtyard. He looked back and saw that the baron, Moloch Vezin, had come over along with his two children. Kai had tried to hide his status as a protector, but his basic disguise was never going to work on those who had spent a long time around him.

“What’s a protector? You’ve got a lot to explain.”

His voice was stern, but his face showed no sign of anger over Kai’s continued concealment of the valuable blessings he possessed.

Kai understood that the baron was in a difficult position and had spoken because Kai was one of his subjects and he had a duty to know more about him.

When the lords around them saw the baron affectionately place his hand on the shoulder of the mysterious protector, they spoke out in surprise.

“So he’s a friend of Lord Moloch?”

“Then he must be the demi-human god that took root to the east of the borderlands.”

Rumors spread among those around them, rippling outward. As the bonds between the lords of the borderlands were being broken, they were searching desperately for someone strong to turn to. In hopes of aligning themselves with the powerful guardian bearer who had slaughtered a diabo with ease—the protector—they approached him eagerly. Given the circumstances, it was only natural that those around them would start to form new opinions of House Moloch.

Kai only hesitated for a few moments.

He still hadn't decided what sort of relationship humanity might build with his nation of the valley. He at least wanted to stop everyone from finding out that he was a subject of House Moloch.

He silently took hold of the baron's hand and moved it away from his shoulder.

With no more than look, he made it clear that he wouldn't be giving his excuse until later.

"I'm the Protector of the Valley. Remember the name."

With that, Kai moved away from the lords that had gathered around him and ran through the chaos in the courtyard. He was aware that Lady White was watching him go, but he had no time to think about her.

His priority was to save Count Balta.

With the count in his debt, he could establish a relationship of cooperation between him and the nation of the valley.

Kai wasn't so heroic that he'd save a man on the verge of death without considering what he had to gain from it. He was acting out of self-interest with the aim of preventing the nation of the valley from being consumed by the chaos.

He used similar movements to the koror to slip quickly through the crowd, and he used his strength to force his way through whenever his way was blocked. Then, when only a cloud of white breath separated Kai from the fight between the gon-no-sōzu and Count Balta, someone appeared to block his way, just as he'd expected.

The small protector who dropped down to stand before him was scowling at him with upturned eyes.

"Stay out of it, Valley One."

"Move. I decided to intervene."

"It's a matter for the species. Protectors don't..."

"If you think you can stop me, go ahead and try."

There was a shock wave as the air around them vibrated.

Nevin vanished before Kia's eyes and then delivered a punch from an angle where Kai couldn't see it coming. Kai's reflexes caused him to swing back his elbow immediately, knocking Nevin's fist aside. Then Nevin aimed a kick at Kai's crotch, but Kai was just barely able to push Nevin's body backward to stop the kick connecting.

"I've learned to keep up."

In their first fight, Kai had felt as though he was fighting another human, and he couldn't keep up because he was overly focused on following Nevin's center of gravity and the movements of his limbs.

But Nevin moved using the wings on his back, so the usual movements that a human would need to make before striking were unnecessary for him. If Nevin's opponent was unaware of this, they'd be helpless when he came at them like a storm.

Kai had already learned this from their previous fight, but his reflexes alone weren't enough for him to avoid Nevin's flurry of attacks completely, so he took several hits.

He accepted that as the price he paid to be able watch what was happening.

All right... I see how it is.

Over Nevin's shoulder, Kai caught sight of the wind magic powering Nevin's aggressive movements.

Even the smallest usage of spiritual energy caused a change in color. The eyes given by the god of the valley were too sharp to miss it.

He's moving by magic explosions.

Kai had been glad to just dodge half of Nevin's attacks, but now he was gradually getting better at it, and most of Nevin's attacks couldn't get too close to him. Eventually, Nevin looked at Kai with a wry smile and then stretched out his hands.

The wind magic he unleashed caused Kai to fly backward. He'd been careless to think that Nevin could only fight using hand-to-hand combat.

Kai then took a kick to his defenseless back as he rolled clumsily. He watched the world rotate in his vision several times as the feeling of white heat made him grimace.

This opponent was as tough as he'd expected.

Nevin calmly looked down as Kai was struggling to his feet, and then he came at him with a drop kick. It was a merciless attack that Kai took to the face, leaving him seeing an explosion of stars.

With blood spraying from his nose, Kai somehow managed to catch the next kick, and then he wrapped his arm around Nevin's ankle and twisted his own body to force Nevin to the ground. Although his opponent was a protector, Kai was still superior in terms of physical strength.

Once Nevin was pinned down on the ground, there was a look of regret on his face for just a moment. Kai resisted Nevin's frenzied attempts to struggle free while punching his face over and over with a clenched fist. Kai didn't go easy on Nevin just because he looked like a frail child.

"Neviiin!" a voice cried.

It was the voice of Count Balta as he fought off the priests.

Kai managed to stop himself and then looked dumbfounded at his own blood-covered fists. The owner of the blood then used that opportunity to strike.

Kai was blown back by wind magic that hit him below his jaw, freeing Nevin, who kicked like an angered horse and buried his heel deep into Kai's solar plexus.

As Nevin broke free, he continued moving with a loud flap of his wings, carrying him far away from Kai.

Shit...

Count Balta's voice had sounded desperate.

Although his life hung in the balance, the count was still strong-willed enough to worry when Nevin was in danger. Several lords had appeared around the count to help him fight off the priests surrounding him.

"Father! I'm at your side!"

A group of new allies went running toward Count Balta.

Kai felt disappointed when he realized that there was a familiar face among them.

It was the first son Adol with his kumadori on display, and he was followed by his retainers as he went to assist his father.

This increased the number of people around Count Balta considerably, putting the priests at a disadvantage. However, the scene that played out next left Kai so stunned that he stood as still as a scarecrow.

The dagger held by Lord Adol plunged into his father's back, and Count Balta was impaled by the weapons of the priests surrounding him a moment later.

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Amid the frozen silence of winter, there was a growing sound of increasing tension.

It was like a clean vibration that you'd hear when picking a taut bowstring, and it was spreading outward. Some strange, instinctive fear caused Kai's muscles to tense up throughout his entire body.

Soon after, the ground of the borderlands began to shake.

The human screams that followed may have been in response to Count Balta meeting his end, or may have been caused by shock at the way the ground shook.

The cause and the effect were both clear to see. It no longer mattered whether Count Balta was their king or not; he had been the ruler of their land and now he had fallen. The system of government encompassing the vastness of the borderlands collapsed in an instant with the hundreds of land gods each becoming a fragment of the shattered whole.

The humans were no longer united by a god assembly, and the control they held over their land fell dramatically.

Resist! the god of the valley cried.

Kai knew immediately what it was he needed to resist against.

A formless pressure was rapidly growing in the sky above him, and it felt as though that pressure was pushing down on him from above. The sensation soon ended, but he knew that it was more than just his imagination when he looked up and saw that the gods high in the sky above now appeared closer.

He guessed the gods weren't actually moving closer; the reality was less pleasant. The boundary that formed the edge of their world had contracted.

Is our world inside a bubble?

He felt a slight chill and then shook off the thought.

It wasn't a bubble, but the boundary that defined the world had shrank. Kai was able to reach this more precise understanding of what was happening by merging his thoughts with those of the god of the valley.

His body trembled as he witnessed the wilted body of Count Balta. Kai had already accepted that the count was dead, but even so, he was able to share the anguished feelings of those who still feared for the count's safety. While others were shouting Count Balta's name in anguish, there was a fool who glared at Kai as he held up a glowing white lump and declared himself victorious.

It was the first son Adol.

His close followers raised their weapons into the air and cheered their master's name in response to his declaration, and soon after, nobles from the center also began cheering for his victory. The cries from the angered lords of the borderlands were then drowned out by the shaking of the ground.

"There need be but one king god for one million humans!"

The gon-no-sōzu cried out in a trained voice in an attempt to stop those loyal to the former warden of the borderlands from rushing forward, and the other priests did likewise.

"The fabric of humanity is but a single piece."

"The only vessel for the king bestowed upon us by Manu is Holy Kushalu."

"The bad branch has been cut away."

“Manu of the great tree will give life and growth to virtuous new branches!”

The lords around them seemed to lose their momentum and fall into confusion. Meanwhile, the nobles from the center who understood what their religion demanded of them continued the declarations that the priests had started.

“Serve your god!”

“First we need to decide on a successor as warden of the borderlands!”

The borderlands had lost the power of the god assembly that belonged to humans.

As the people most directly affected, the lords of the borderlands understood just how much danger their land was in now that they had lost their official ruler.

“Adol holds the divine spirit and will therefore be the successor!”

Although there was anger at Adol because he had committed the grave sin of patricide, he continued to insist that he had the rightful claim while appearing unconcerned by the objections of others. People were stepping forward to voice their objections one after the other.

Count Balta had other sons who were away serving as officials in the royal capital, but their wives and retainers who’d remained in the provincial capital were each asserting that their master should be there, for it was they who had the rightful claim. They tried to convince others by praising their master’s mastery of war and his power, but most of all, they spoke of the bonds of marriage that tied their master to the center.

The younger sons had weaker followings. The fourth son had traveled to study, but his mother was there, and she gathered together what family she had present and shamelessly insisted that her son had the superior claim.

As for the sixth son Ashna who should have been engaged at the banquet so he could serve as a sign of the solidarity between lords of the borderlands, he emerged from the crowd hurling wild screams at Adol for killing their father. Ashna threw profanities at Adol, denouncing him as a coward who’d stabbed their honorable father in the back.

All kinds of grievances that members of the household held against one another were being made public all at once. But such internal disputes were commonplace in any large household when it came time to decide upon the successor to head of that house, and even the younger of the lords understood that it was better to stand back and allow the dispute to play out.

Kai had no interest in the arguments over who would succeed the position of warden of the borderlands. As he approached the crowd around the fallen Count Balta and forced his way through, his main emotion was disappointment because his plan hadn't gone as he'd hoped.

When he finally laid eyes upon the body of Count Balta, he found he'd been reduced to a shriveled old man. It was as though the muscular warrior who'd declared himself a king god had been someone else.

The hole that his godstone was torn from must have been in his back. The body was in surprisingly good condition.

When the mysterious protector suddenly came near, those who'd been close to the count moved back as if Kai unnerved them. Some called him a disobedient god while others mistakenly felt the need to plead for mercy on their master's behalf. It was as though they expected him to do something to the corpse.

"Hey," Kai said.

Adol looked down at the somewhat shorter Kai, and then his throat moved visibly as he swallowed.

He must have recognized Kai as the masked intruder who'd been angry about a curse some time earlier. He was afraid of Kai, but still he stepped forward to defend his actions. However, he only opened his mouth and said nothing.

"I don't like you," Kai told him.

"..."

This unknown protector who had a certain kind of authority over the gathering of guardian bearers had now expressed hate toward Adol.

Adol seemed to worry that this might cause others to react negatively toward

him. He became frantic to justify himself over the killing of his father.

“I just happened to be behind him at the time. It was the righteous thing for me to correct my father’s...”

“...?”

“For the borderlands to stand independent, the idea is, well, unacceptable. Though I suppose you see it differently, Protector.”

“See what differently? I don’t really care. Succeed him if that’s what you want.”

“You... What?”

“But I think you’ve got some hard days ahead if you do succeed him.”

Kai imagined what ordinary succession of the head of a household would look like. He was imagining that it would normally be a very different affair.

The death of someone vital to a god assembly, such as the warden of the borderlands, would put the state of the world under strain. There was almost certainly some very careful procedure that would normally be followed.

In one example of such a procedure, a trusted guardian bearer might start acting as his representative while he still lived, and in the few days required for a takeover, there could be a transfer of devotion to this trusted individual. Kai imagined that the transfer of devotion could easily happen if all guardian bearers ranking directly below the head of the house gave orders for it to take place. After a new head of the household had been appointed, the devotion could then be transferred back. He knew there had to be some procedure like this.

Though that didn’t matter. In this case, the warden of the borderlands had been killed with no prior preparation, which clearly conflicted with the need for humans to maintain strong links between their land gods, and it meant that a difficult problem was awaiting the next warden of the borderlands.

If Adol wished to succeed his father, then he could succeed him as he pleased.

It just meant that he would have to reclaim the devotion of every lord of the borderlands one at a time.

The question of how a successor would go about gathering the support of others right after committing patricide was a very interesting one. Kai imagined that Adol was going to have a difficult road ahead of him.

Kai looked up at him and asked, “Why not go ahead and eat it?” Adol looked at his father’s godstone in his hand and looked just slightly repulsed, but this reminded him what gave him the upper hand over everyone else in this succession dispute.

Naturally, he couldn’t just consume the godstone. He would have to use some countermeasure against the poison that came from eating one’s own kind.

“Humans have been weakened even further because you killed your own father. Come spring, there’ll be an invasion of demi-humans in the borderlands. Make sure you’re ready for it before deciding to be his successor.”

Humans lived in an unforgiving world where everyone wished to become stronger. For guardian bearers, that meant constant training and a hunger for blessings of a stronger god whenever one became available.

Even at the hint of a demi-human invasion, Adol merely looked thoughtful for a moment without ever seeming reluctant. He didn’t seem to understand the danger that he was in, as if he believed that the human rule over the borderlands would remain stable for hundreds of years to come. Kai felt he knew all he needed to know about Adol, and so he lost interest in him and walked away.

“Do you mean to threaten us with an invasion, god of demi-humans?”

There was a rattling sound from an outstretched staff. The one who appeared to block Kai’s path was of course the gon-no-sōzu.

Kai gazed up into the wide pupils of the gon-no-sōzu and saw that they were filled with rage. Astonishingly, the kumadori that slowly appeared on his face was on the level of quart, which must have been an effect of the secret medicine he’d swallowed before the fight.

The gon-no-sōzu had addressed Kai as “god of demi-humans.”

Despite knowing that Kai was no more than a simple villager from Lag, he’d chosen to address him that way. Kai understood how much power such words

might carry.

He would ostracize me? Either the god of the valley made the suggestion, or Kai had the thought himself.

Another self hidden within him guessed that the gon-no-sōzu desired to unite the people under a common enemy.

The quickest way to bring the scattered people together was to find an enemy that they all shared a common hatred for. The word “con man” came to Kai’s mind but then vanished.

“I forbid you! I will stop you if it costs me my life!”

“...”

The gon-no-sōzu moved to stand in Kai’s path and then spread both arms wide as if facing an enemy. It was a stance that would leave him wide open in a fight, and Kai understood that the priest was offering himself as a human sacrifice so that humans could establish Kai as their common foe.

Kai considered playing along. He only had to think about it for a short while.

Wind magic.

An invisible gust of wind blew the gon-no-sōzu back.

That opening was more than enough. Kai quickly left the area and made a show of doing so.

Nevin...

Kai was searching for the old protector.

His figure, white like snow, had not been visible in the courtyard.

Kai had a bad feeling. Nevin had always watched over Count Balta, but Count Balta was no longer in this world. Nevin had watched until the very end, but it was hard to imagine how he’d felt or what he’d do now. Kai still felt a pain in his heart when he remembered the look of surrender in Nevin’s eyes.

Kai wouldn’t let him die.

Kai sent out a telepathic message without worrying about the voices of the people chasing after him.

He called Nevin's name many times. But he received no response. There was nothing but an increasing number of snowflakes that landed on his cheeks and turned to drops of water.

He couldn't understand why he cared so much for someone he'd been fighting with. Although they were both protectors, this didn't make him feel the slightest bit of camaraderie toward Nevin.

The reason hit him suddenly.

These must be the god of the valley's feelings...

Earlier, he'd felt the same heavy emotions hit him for just a moment. He guessed that some alignment of their emotions must be happening.

It was a shared feeling that made his heart ache.

He'd never experienced such feelings before, and he knew that this was a feeling that only those who'd shared the same pain could understand. He remembered that his predecessor had lived a long time as the survivor of some ancient people before vanishing from the world with no one knowing though the tribes around still feared him. Those circumstances felt very similar to Nevin's.

Don't die, thought Kai.

His heart ached as though it was being torn in two.

It seemed that guardian bearers that came to be called protectors would generally live long lives, and Kai felt sure that their lifespans would often extend beyond the destruction of their own species.

For just a moment, Kai saw a fragment of a memory that related to his predecessor's demise. He knew immediately that this memory belonged to the previous god of the valley.

He couldn't see the god of the valley's face. This was a memory viewed through the god of the valley's eyes, so that was to be expected.

But Kai knew that the god of the valley had been laughing.

He had been fighting some fearsome monster and crying as he brandished his weapon.

It was a brawny, four-legged beast with horns, and Kai had never seen such a creature before. It was enraged and howling repeatedly. His predecessor had fought recklessly in spite of his wounds, like a child not knowing when to give up.

This was the cause of death for one who had lived such a long life. It wasn't the natural end to his life; it was the point where he could not bear to go on living. Kai somehow shared his feeling of having lost all reason to live.

He'd wanted to die a warrior's death. That had been his predecessor's final wish. This was where the dream of his predecessor ended.

Those must have been his final moments.

But what was Nevin's wish at that moment? He'd been chased from his homeland when the long reign of House Balta began. The land had been developed by powerful human hands, and he must have watched it grow fertile. If he'd found refuge in the joy that came from watching the world grow brighter as the land gods steadily grew stronger, then where would he want to be when welcoming the demise of that world and himself?

His gravesite?

Kai wondered if that gravesite might be down in the underground space where the sacred remains of Baalitoliga rested and Nevin's kind had been sealed away, but he concluded that it had merely been refuge for them in a time of trouble. Kai gathered his thoughts and tried to think calmly.

Guardian bearers had the power to feel a vague sense of where their god's gravesite was located. That would often feel like a curse that bound them to the land, but by concentrating, the same feeling could also be used to find the whereabouts of another god's gravesite.

Unsurprisingly, the first thing Kai felt was the gravesite of Baalitoliga and the incredible power it held. He tried to concentrate a little harder.

The harder he concentrated, the more he felt the divine power that filled him gathering behind his forehead. At the same time, he felt as though the forehead

glyph of his kumadori was becoming so hot that it might burn him.

Then a picture of a scene happening somewhere else came to his mind.

The information gained through this spiritual vision had a different nature to what he'd see through his real eyes. This sensory information was something separate entirely, and Kai realized that this was another type of ability.

Another effect from the god of the valley?

Ever since he'd seen that his glyph was shaped like an eye, he'd always had a sense that it meant something. He didn't think that what he'd seen was merely a daydream or an illusion, so he followed his senses and ran toward it, which meant running downhill toward the third residence.

He could sense that priests were stubbornly following him from behind, but he just laughed to himself, "Follow me if you think you can." No matter how much they increased their divinity through the use of medicines, they were still far from being on the level of the god of the valley. The god of the valley was becoming increasingly powerful as it gained the devotion of demi-human species with Kai as its representative.

Kai's physical abilities were on another level entirely. He passed straight through the second residence as he headed toward the third residence, and then he climbed the soaring stone wall of the third residence using the smallest of footholds.

Once he was on the main roof, he saw a structure that hadn't been visible from the ground. It was clear to see above where the main support pillar of the building was.

From where he stood, he could also see the wreckage that had to be the scars from his fight with Adol the day before. All of the roof tiles had come away from one surface, and the damage looked so great that it felt like it had to be the work of someone else.

His gravesite's near here.

Nevin had referred to Baalitoliga, the main object of worship for House Balta, as a mountain god.

That gravesite was at the peak of the mountain, and the first residence was also a mausoleum that held the gravesite within.

Kai realized that it was here in the third residence where the first Balta defeated Nevin, and the building had been constructed as a mausoleum that sealed away the gravesite stolen from the winged species. For one small mountain to hold two gravesites belonging to powerful gods was a strange circumstance.

Much like the first residence, there was a main pillar that rose to form a pointed tower, and on top of that tower was the one Kai was seeking. Kai realized that the eyes he'd felt on him during the ritual contests could have come from that tower.

"Leave me alone, moron."

It looked like his wounds had healed already, but Nevin remained covered in blood as if his appearance was no concern to him. He looked at Kai and then wearily took a seat.

The peak of the tower had a roof to ward off the rain, making it look somewhat like a small gazebo. Nevin must have long sought shelter in this place. It included a comfortable chair with a backrest and furniture that looked suitable for storing small possessions. Small bottles made from colored glasses hung from the pillars supporting the roof and inside them were small flowers heated by the warmth given off by the third residence.

Guardian bearers were resistant to the cold, so this would be a comfortable enough place to live. Nevin sat on the chair in a slovenly fashion as he watched the snow falling from the sky.

"I said leave me alone."

"..."

When Kai clambered up the main pillar and looked down on Nevin, Nevin looked back at him briefly and then let out a long sigh of surrender.

Although there was a roof, it provided minimal cover. The snow would sometimes enter the space when the wind caused the snow to move sideways. Even for someone not normally bothered by the cold, there were limits to such

things.

“Listen... Valley One...”

“...”

“Winters in this place used to be a whole lot worse in the past. The whole village would be snowed under, and we’d come and go through tunnels.”

Kai had no intention of interrupting as he listened to Nevin speaking softly.

He simply stood near him and looked up at the same snow-filled sky while trying to understand his feelings.

“I’d forgotten how bad the snow used to be. Winters are short and spring warm. It makes you forget that there was a time when you couldn’t even move for half the year.”

Nevin’s eyes looked white as they reflected the winter sky.

“It was about now that the snow would get deep. I think this year might be another bad one. It’ll be rougher than anything recent. Look at it. Everything up above is pure white. Snow’s getting heavier too.”

“Nevin...”

“The old days of the borderlands are coming back. Once they start starving, they’ll be back to killing each other, just like how it was. What a waste.”

“Nevin.”

“I don’t want to see it. Not again.”

Nevin closed his eyes as if he’d decided he’d take a nap.

It seemed to Kai like Nevin’s very existence was weakening, like he might vanish there and then.

“Kai...”

“What?”

“If there’s something you don’t get, or something you need to talk about, seek out the others. I’ll bet they’re all bored. They’ll be so eager to help you out that you’ll struggle to get rid of them.”

Kai guessed that “the others” meant other protectors.

But Kai wasn’t thinking about that.

“What are you saying? It’s you I’ll come talk to.”

“No. I’m done. I’m sick of it all.”

“Come on. Talk to me.”

Nevin eyes opened for a moment.

“Can’t be bothered,” he said as if it was a huge burden.

“There’s an ocarina for gathering the others. Blow on it as hard as you can. If they’re close, they’ll come.”

“I’m telling you to stick around.”

“Just don’t lose it.”

“Listen to me.”

“I heard you already.”

“Then answer me.”

“...”

It was like an argument between two children refusing to listen to each other.

Then, after a brief silence, Nevin looked up at Kai.

“Take my stone,” he said sadly.

“You’re not listening.”

“Just do it.”

“I’m not eating your stone.”

“It’ll taste good.”

“Shut up. I’d sooner toss it in a river.”

“That’s good enough for me.”

Kai was desperate to keep Nevin talking.

When Nevin tried to reach for his own chest, Kai grabbed his hand and held it

with all his strength. As he held Nevin's hand, Kai cried. The sadness he felt was too much to bear, and he couldn't help it any longer.

He could smell Nevin and feel his warmth.

Nevin was startled when Kai held him, but after just a moment's hesitation, he moved his hand behind Kai's back in a show of affection.

"You're so damn warm," Nevin said softly.



King of the Yaso

It was another silent day with nothing but the piled-up snow around them.

Nevin poked out his head from inside a snow cave and shook the snow from his fur before using the wings on his back to soar up into the outside world.

“They’ll find us.”

“They’ll know where our village is!”

His people tried to discourage him as they poked out their faces behind him, but Nevin was too caught up in enjoying freedom for the first time in a long while. He waved back to them to tell them that his body, covered in white fur, wouldn’t stand out against the winter scenery. Then he soared higher up into the sky as if he had nothing to fear.

Heavy clouds hung low in a dimly lit sky, and the ever-falling snow ensured visibility would remain low. Spotting someone with a body so well camouflaged would be no easy task.

From holes that looked like polka dots in the snow, he saw several of his people peeking out their heads as if the village chief’s selfishness made them tempted to leave with him. No one would have guessed that there was a village here under the deep snow populated by hundreds of people. The large tribe that was targeting the land, the great tribe of humans from the south, had never once found their village.

Above all, this was the height of winter. Finding food was difficult during this harsh season, and there were few who dared take the risk of wandering across this land. What few there were included the kobudeer tribe who lived on their great fat stores and whose teeth could strip the bark from the trees regardless of the season. The flying beeks—the natural enemy of the yaso species such as the lulso—were nowhere to be seen at this time of year.

Winter in barren lands would drive even the most troublesome of beasts, who would rule the lands during any other season, into their nests, making it the

safest time of the year for the lulso despite its harshness.

Until recently that was.

I have to be the one to fix this.

The blessings Nevin received made him invulnerable to the cold.

The lulso could not tolerate low temperatures, but the guardian bearers who served as their soldiers were an exception.

Nevin was chief of the lulso and king over all eight of the winged ones. Among some of the winged tribes that normally laid eggs, a special child would sometimes gain life while still growing within the stomach of a queen and then be born living. Their bodies would grow to be strong, and they were particularly intelligent in many cases. It was generally these individuals who would inherit the treasured land gods of the winged ones. Nevin was likewise found to have these rare properties and he was given a guardian.

As Nevin protected his species from the harsh battle for survival on the desolate plains, he gradually became stronger and wiser, and they had made him king of the yaso before he knew it.

If I can't save the ones they've caught... it'll be our village next.

He'd heard news.

A village had been destroyed.

Even in this terrible winter, they're still finding our nests and destroying them.

Creatures that took to their nests and turned sluggish made easy prey for the humans.

Not only were their guardian bearers resistant to the cold, the humans could strip the pelts from other living creatures to cover themselves as they marched tirelessly, even through deep snow.

A budding village of the lulso formed by a recent splitting of the nest had been attacked. Several of his people were killed while those with the most beautiful wings were chosen as prisoners. The humans had slaughtered numerous species that lived on the land, and they kept body parts of the fallen to commemorate their victories. The small lulso seemed to match their

preferences exactly because they were often captured alive and then kept as playthings. When the humans grew tired of tormenting them, they would rip off their wings and laugh as they died.

He wanted to save his people before such terrible things happened to them.

Lulso would beg for their lives as humans tortured them by tearing off their wings and demanded to know the whereabouts of more of their kind. Many lulso feared losing their wings so badly that they'd talk, but the humans would tear off their wings all the same. It was just another reason why the malicious humans had to be dealt with before they expanded enough to reach more villages.

The sun was low and the sky dim as Nevin searched for signs of the humans. When he found them, they were already embroiled in a battle.

They were distressingly close to the lulso village. It was entirely possible that they'd been headed for Nevin's village with the intent of raiding it, but had been unfortunate enough to encounter another enemy.

The mountain god!

The lulso village was a nest hidden among shrubs and undergrowth at the foot of a small mountain that rose from the barren plains. And at the peak of that mountain, a savage god of fearsome power had made its nest.

The massive serpent had a long coiling body, three heads with mouths large enough to swallow a kobudeer whole, and two tails that rattled when they shook.

The mountain god was a natural enemy of the lulso, but it also protected them by keeping outside invaders away. It was incredibly unusual for a small mountain to hold the gravesites of two different land gods, and the two species that had provided host vessels for those gods had formed a symbiotic relationship.

The undergrowth concealing the lulso village was a natural defensive wall that had been planted and nurtured for the sake of preventing the mountain god from attacking. It was covered in thorns, and the shrubs gave off a scent hated by the mountain god.

We're saved, Nevin thought.

The mountain god had a terrible temper and would never allow its nest to be disturbed. Its robust trunk was thick like a large tree, but above all, it had strength fearsome enough to crush a large boulder once it coiled itself around it.

The human army had provoked the god of the mountain. It was alarming to learn that they could dispatch an army so large across a desolate plain in winter. The humans had advanced knowledge of metalworking, and their weapons were mostly iron-made. The individual soldiers were weak, but when they attacked in numbers, the damage they caused could not be ignored.

The mountain god quickly became covered in blood as it thrashed in its violent rage. Nevin was sure that one or two hundred humans had been killed just while he was watching.

The superiority of the mountain god was evident. Then, from among the human army, new soldiers stepped forward who were clearly different from the others. These soldiers charged at the mountain god all at once.

Some of the humans were guardian bearers just like Nevin. The course of the battle changed quickly. The humans had brought an absurdly powerful force to attack in winter. There were at least 100 guardian bearers. Humans were a widespread species, but even so, gathering 100 guardian bearers together must have left their territories undefended. This was not normal behavior. They were risking everything.

The mountain god howled.

It was a cry like Nevin had never heard before. From the gaps in the rocks, more of its kind crawled out to come to its aid, but those were slaughtered one after another.

Nevin understood immediately what would happen if that army reached his village. He trembled with fear unlike anything he had ever felt before.

I just need to save our friends.

He sneaked into the camp to the rear of the humans and searched each part of it until he found the cage that held his friends.

His fellow lulso were bound hand and foot with chains placed around their necks. The bruises that covered their limbs were evidence of how brutally they'd been treated.

Nevin smashed the cage open and then broke the chains.

He scolded his friends for crying, and then, just as they were about to take flight, their surroundings shook as the mountain god unleashed a shrill cry louder than any before it. Nevin brushed the snow from his eyelashes and hurried outside.

Human victory cries echoed across the mountain. The humans, ecstatic over the expansion of their territory, were dancing wildly in the snow. Some hurried to round up the children of the mountain god like playthings, and others were absorbed in the process of tearing scales from the mountain god's body. They showed no concern for the soldiers they'd lost. They were satisfied as long as they won and demonstrated the superior strength of their species.

The lulso feared they'd be caught and tormented once more. His people fled, but Nevin knew he had to find some way to distract the attention of the humans away from his nest. With the mountain god defeated, the lulso nesting at the mountain's foot would think they had no choice but to flee the place.

If I can just buy them some time.

Nevin took flight.

He grazed soldiers of the human army gathered at the top of the mountain as he flew by. Humans could only crawl along the ground, so their only hope of catching lulso was to target their nests.

The attention of the humans was drawn to the lulso flying through the sky. The humans who'd been playing with the remains of the mountain god were now pointing at Nevin and crying out.

You've seen me. Now come, humans.

Nevin's wings were exceptionally beautiful even for a lulso. It also meant that he could fly at high speed. Some of the humans chased after him in their excitement.

“Ignore the decoy!”

Nevin’s plan soon came to nothing.

They had spotted his people fleeing some distance away.

The human army that covered the mountain side moved in to crush them. Nevin drew back in a panic, knowing that they would attack the nest. The wind direction changed and snow was increasingly entering his eyes. Nevin screamed as a shiver ran up his back. The thorny plants surrounding the nest had been cleared away, and humans were pouring into the nest.

Yaso could fly, but they were virtually powerless in their nests. They’d become skilled at hiding deeper within their nests when threatened by humans, but that was only enough to ensure the survival of a few.

Their once-peaceful nest was now stained with the bodily fluids that spilled from Nevin’s people.

Nevin was spurred on by his rage. He approached one entrance to the nest and did what he could to stop the swarm of humans from entering, despite knowing it was too little, too late. He killed one human after another.

“This bug’s a guardian bearer!” a human shouted.

Lulso were far inferior in terms of physical strength, so they were taken aback when Nevin could overpower so many humans. That was when several human guardian bearers appeared. Nevin fought madly for his life and drove the humans back many times using the martial arts of the yaso.

But the next guardian bearer that appeared was the strongest human warrior in the army.

“Surrender quietly.”

The first Balta was a small man, covered in the blood of the mountain god, and wearing a faint smile.

Afterword

We've finally reached volume 3 of *Teogonia*.

Although my revisions to the text of the web version were pre-planned, I never expected it to be such a great task. I regret that I needed to have my submission deadlines extended several times. My editor is always so good to me, but I fear I caused considerable damage to his stomach, and I'm deeply remorseful. I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere apologies.

In the process of making revisions, a rather curious thing occurred.

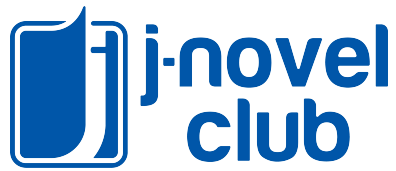
I have no doubt that you noticed for yourself the moment you picked up this book, but the cover features two beautiful brides! I was already aware that Lady White was beautiful, but the stunning lady in red standing by her side was unknown to me.

This is the noble lady from the center?! Kawano-sensei had produced such a charming illustration of her that I took the unusual step of modifying the text of the novel itself. She was originally a slightly cute girl with big fish lips, but now she has been elevated to the status of a beautiful lady who's rather seductive for someone her age. Such a change in the description was only natural. Likewise, it's only natural that she should receive favorable treatment in future volumes (by the author in an emotional sense).

From the bottom of my heart, I'd like to express my appreciation to Kawano-sensei for drawing illustrations that tugged at this author's heartstrings, Aoyama-sensei for taking on the task of a manga adaptation, and to my editor Yamaguchi-sama.

And to the readers who are still with me, I am deeply grateful.

I am sorry that you had to wait so long for volume 3.



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Teogonia: Volume 3

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